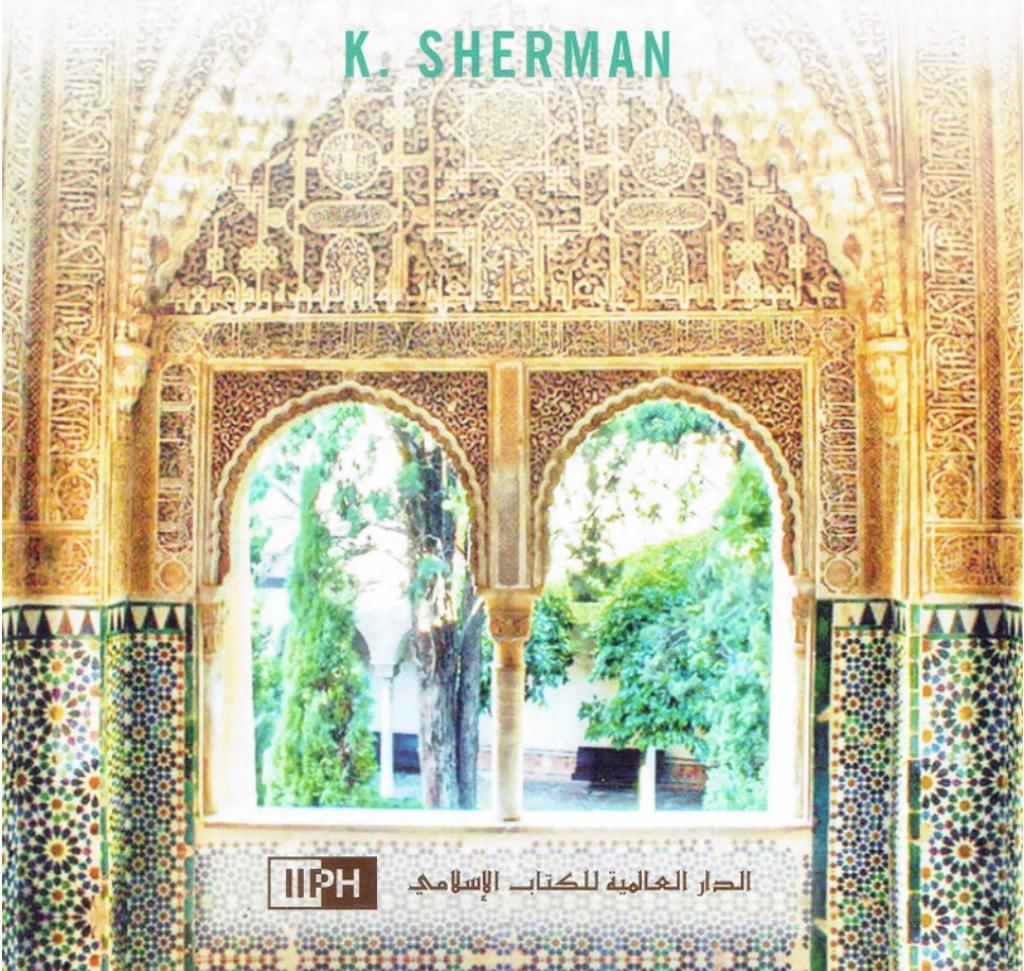


WHY ISLAM?

لماذا الإسلام؟

K. SHERMAN



IIPH

الدار العالمية للكتاب الإسلامي



IN THE NAME OF
ALLAH
THE ALL-COMPASSIONATE, ALL-MERCIFUL



Why Islam ?

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PRONUNCIATION AND TRANSLITERATION CHART

Arabic script	Pronunciation	Transliterated form
أ	short 'a', as in <i>cat</i>	a
إ - ئ	longer 'a', as in <i>cab</i> (not as in <i>cake</i>)	â
ب	/b/ as in <i>bell</i> , <i>rubber</i> and <i>tab</i>	b
ت	/t/ as in <i>tap</i> , <i>mustard</i> and <i>sit</i>	t
ه	takes the sound of the preceding diacritical mark sometimes ending in h (when in pausal form): ah, ih, or ooh; or atu(n), ati(n) or ata(n) when uninterrupted	h or t (when followed by another Arabic word)
ث	/th/ as in <i>thing</i> , <i>maths</i> and <i>wealth</i>	th
ج	/j/ as in <i>jam</i> , <i>ajar</i> and <i>age</i>	j
ح	a 'harsher' sound than the English initial /h/, and may occur medially and in word-final position as well	ḥ
خ	as in <i>Bach</i> (in German); may occur initially and medially as well	kh
د	/d/ as in <i>do</i> , <i>muddy</i> and <i>red</i>	d
ذ	as in <i>this</i> , <i>father</i> , and <i>smooth</i>	dh
ر	/r/ as in <i>raw</i> , <i>arid</i> and <i>war</i> ; may also be a rolled 'r', as pronounced in Spanish	r

8 Pronunciation and transliteration chart

Arabic script	Pronunciation	Transliterated form
ز	/z/ as in <i>zoo</i> , <i>easy</i> and <i>gaze</i>	z
س	/s/ as in <i>so</i> , <i>messy</i> and <i>grass</i>	s
ش	as in <i>ship</i> , <i>ashes</i> and <i>rush</i>	sh
ص	no close equivalent in English, but may be approximated by pronouncing it as /sw/ or /s/ farther back in the mouth	ṣ
ض	no close equivalent in English, but may be approximated by pronouncing /d/ farther back in the mouth	ḍ
ط	no close equivalent in English, but may be approximated by pronouncing it as /t/ farther back in the mouth	ṭ
ظ	no close equivalent in English, but may be approximated by pronouncing ‘the’ farther back in the mouth	<u>dh</u>
ع	no close equivalent in English: a guttural sound in the back of the throat	‘
غ	no close equivalent in English, but may be closely approximated by pronouncing it like the French /r/ in ‘rouge’	gh
ف	/f/ as in <i>fill</i> , <i>effort</i> and <i>muff</i>	f

Arabic script	Pronunciation	Transliterated form
ڧ	no close equivalent in English, but may be approximated by pronouncing it as /k/ farther back in the mouth	q
ڣ	/k/ as in <i>king, buckle</i> and <i>tack</i>	k
ڶ	/l/ as in <i>lap, halo</i> ; in the word <i>Allah</i> , it becomes velarized as in <i>ball</i>	l
ڻ	/m/ as in <i>men, simple</i> and <i>ram</i>	m
ڻ	/n/ as in <i>net, ant</i> and <i>can</i>	n
ڻ - ڻ - ڻ	/h/ as in <i>hat</i> ; unlike /h/ in English, in Arabic /h/ is pronounced in medial and word-final positions as well	h
ڻ	as in <i>wet</i> and <i>away</i>	w
ڻ	long ‘u’, as in <i>boot</i> and <i>too</i>	oo
ڻ	as in <i>yard</i> and <i>mayo</i>	y
ڻ	long ‘e’, as in <i>eat, beef</i> and <i>see</i>	ee
ڻ	glottal stop: may be closely approximated by pronouncing it like ‘t’ in the Cockney English pronunciation of <i>butter</i> : <i>bu'er</i> , or the stop sound in <i>uh-oh!</i>	’ (Omitted in initial position)

Diphthongs:

Arabic script	Pronunciation	Transliterated form
أو ، و	long ‘o’, as in <i>owe, boat</i> and <i>go</i>	au, aw
أي ، ي	long ‘a’, as in <i>aid, rain</i> and <i>say</i>	ay, ai, ei

Diacritical marks (*tashkeel*):

Name of mark	Pronunciation	Transliterated form
fathah	very short ‘a’ or schwa (unstressed vowel)	a
kasrah	shorter version of ee or schwa (unstressed vowel)	i
Dammah	shorter version of oo	u
shaddah	a doubled consonant is stressed in the word, and the length of the sound is also doubled	double letter
sukoon	no vowel sound between consonants or at the end of a word	absence of vowel

ARABIC HONORIFIC SYMBOLS USED IN THIS BOOK

(ﷺ): *Subḥānahu wa ta‘ālā* — ‘The Exalted’

(؏): *Salla-Allāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam* — ‘Blessings and peace
be upon him’

(؏): ‘Alayhis-salām — ‘Peace be upon him’

(؏): *Radiya Allāhu ‘anhu* — ‘May Allah be pleased with him’

(؏): *Radiya Allāhu ‘anhā* — ‘May Allah be pleased with her’

ABOUT THE WORD 'LORD'

The word *lord* in English has several related meanings. The original meaning is ‘master’ or ‘ruler’, and in this sense it is often used to refer to human beings: ‘the lord of the mansion’ or ‘Lord So-and-So’ (in the United Kingdom, for example). The word *Lord* with a capital L is used in the lexicon of Islam to refer to the One and Only God — Allah. In Islam, there is no ambiguity about the meaning of this word. While it is true that one may occasionally use the word *lord* (whether capitalized or not) to refer to a human being, in Islamic discourse the reference of this term is always clear from the context. Whereas for Christians, Hindus and other polytheists, the word *Lord* with a capital ‘L’ may refer to Allah, to Jesus or to some imagined deity, for Muslims, there can be no plurality of meaning. Allah alone is the Lord, and the Lord is Allah — not Jesus, not Rama, not any other being.

The Editor

WHEN 'JIHAD' REFERS TO FIGHTING

Although jihad is often translated into English as 'holy war', it must be noted that war has never been described as 'holy' in any of Islam's primary texts or even early Islamic literature. Linguistically speaking, jihad is an Islamic term that applies to a broad spectrum of activities, ranging from daily striving to meet the day's challenges, to the striving against one's desires and self, to the struggle to provide for one's family. Its basic definition is 'the act of striving or struggling in the way of Allah'. Therefore, jihad is not limited to war; it includes struggling with one's soul, speech, body and wealth so that the message of Allah (*Subḥānahu wa Ta'ālā* — Glorified and Exalted is He) reaches all humans willing to receive it.

Islamic scholars have referred to different types of jihad, such as jihad against the self (to understand Islam, act upon it, call others to it and be patient with the difficulties of making this call), jihad against the Devil (repelling Satanic whispers, doubts and lusts), jihad against the tongue (controlling it, using it to enjoin what is good, forbid what is wrong, spread the correct teachings of Islam and answer false ideologies), jihad against aggression (with the purpose of protecting Islam and the lives, honour and property of Muslims) and other types of jihad like jihad against the hypocrites, jihad against oppressors and jihad against mischief makers.

Jihad — in the context of fighting — has specific rules and conditions that need to be met before jihad is initiated. The first rule is that people are not to be fought because of what they believe, or to coerce them to accept Islam. The second rule is to 'fight only those who fight you' and never initiate unprovoked aggression (*Qur'an* 2:

190). That means that Muslims are only allowed to fight back, rather than initiating fighting; but 'fighting back' includes fighting against actual aggression as well as proactively addressing real threats of aggression. In both cases, Muslims are instructed to be prepared and ready to defend their nation before they actually engage in military conflict. There are additional conditions, but the above-mentioned conditions are vital for putting jihad in its broader meaning in the proper context.

Another condition of the sort of jihad which involves fighting is that it should take place only under an Islamic authority that 'raises the banner' for such jihad. It is not following the Sunnah at all for any individual or self-appointed group of Muslims to wage war on behalf of a nation. Instead, Muslims should be united under the single authority of an imam or khaleefah (caliph), except in the case where an individual needs to defend his own family and property, or to help his neighbour to do so. This is proved by the example of the early Muslims as well as texts in the Qur'an and the Sunnah:

﴿When there comes to them [the hypocrites] a matter related to [public] safety or fear, they spread it about; if only they had referred it to the Messenger and to such of them as are in authority, those among them who are able to think through the matter would have understood it.﴾

(Qur'an 4: 83)

«Hudhayfah ibn Yaman asked the Prophet (*salla Allâhu 'alayhi wa sallam* — blessings and peace be upon him): What if (the Muslims) have no single leader (they are divided into disputing groups)? The Prophet (ﷺ) answered: If they have no single leader or unified group, then leave all these disputing groups, even if you have to bite on a tree until your death.» (part of a longer hadith recorded by Bukhari)

There are other conditions for jihad. In general, the rules laid out for war in Islam should be upheld unless there is some legitimate need or strategy when fighting occurs that would necessitate going

against those rules. A Muslim should not kill himself or herself (*Qur'an* 4: 29) nor kill another Muslim, except by accident (*Qur'an* 4: 92). Women, children, the elderly and other non-combatants should not be harmed. Land should not be destroyed, nor trees cut down. Corpses should not be mutilated. Islam should not be imposed upon non-believers. Rather, if combatant non-Muslims choose on their own to embrace Islam, even if only as a deceitful trick, it should be accepted by the Muslim leadership, and fighting should stop. Peace should be sought before lives are lost. Treaties and agreements should be upheld. Prisoners should be well-treated. Above all, justice must be done.

﴿Fight in the path [according to the rules set by Allah] of Allah only those who fight you, but do not commit aggression [transgress limits]. Allah does not love aggressors....And fight them until persecution is no more, and religion is [freely embraced] for [the individual's faith in] Allah. But if they desist, then let there be no aggression except against transgressors.﴾ (*Qur'an* 2: 190, 193)

﴿Allah does not forbid you from being good, kind, just, and fair to those who have not fought you because of religion nor driven you from your homeland. Allah loves those who are just. Allah forbids you from giving allegiance to those who have fought you because of religion and have driven you from your homeland, and those who supported your expulsion...﴾ (*Qur'an* 60: 8-9)

In addition, the Muslim nation is encouraged to maintain strong military capabilities to promote justice and to deter acts of war and aggression.

﴿And make ready for them [their potential aggression] all you can of power, including steeds of war, to deter the enemy of Allah and your enemy, and others besides, whom you may not know but whom Allah knows.﴾ (*Qur'an* 8: 60)

THE ISLAMIC VIEWPOINT ON SLAVERY

Sla~~v~~ery existed before the coming of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ). Islam did not abolish slavery, though it put limits on it and made freeing slaves a highly virtuous act.

In Islam, there is only one way a person may become enslaved and that is by being a non-Muslim among people who have been captured after raising arms and fighting against the Muslim nation. When such people have been conquered, the Muslim ruler has the option of enslaving them or releasing them (with or without ransom), and he makes this decision based upon the best interests and safety of the state. The Prophet (ﷺ) strongly condemned any other means of enslaving a person. Thus, no person may become enslaved due to poverty, debt, kidnapping, committing a crime, voluntarily submitting to slavery, or any other means.

Islam encourages the freeing of slaves and has made the freeing of a slave a form of expiation for sins such as accidental manslaughter, the breaking of a vow, or voiding a fast by engaging in sexual intercourse. The freeing of slaves is also one of the categories upon which the zakâh funds should be spent (*Qur'an* 9: 60). The Qur'an calls the freeing of a slave an act of righteousness that may be performed at any time:

﴿Righteous are those who believe in Allah, the Last Day, the angels, the scripture, and the prophets; and they give money, cheerfully, to the relatives, the orphans, the needy, the wayfarer, the beggars, and to free the slaves.﴾

(*Qur'an* 2: 177)

In regards to the treatment of slaves, the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) said: «They are your brothers whom Allah has put under your authority, so if Allah has put a person's brother under his authority, let him feed him from what he eats and clothe him from what he wears, and let him not overburden him with work, and if he does overburden him with work, then let him help him.» (Bukhari)

«Whoever accuses his slave when he is innocent of what he says will be flogged on the Day of Resurrection.» (Bukhari)

«Whoever slaps his slave or beats him, his expiation is to manumit him.» (Muslim)

«If a man had a slave woman whom he fed — and fed her well, and taught her — and taught her well, then he set her free and married her — he will have a double reward.» (Bukhari and Muslim)

The male owner of a female slave has the right to have sexual intercourse with her as long as he, or the slave's previous owner, has not married her to another person. This is a right exclusive to the slave's owner. No one, including the owner's sons, may touch the woman unless the owner marries her to him. If the slave woman bears her owner a child, then her owner may never sell her and she automatically becomes a free woman upon his death, if he has not released her before that.

As can be seen from this evidence, slavery in Islam is far different from the institution of slavery as known in many non-Muslim countries.

The Editor

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

All praise and thanks belong to Allah alone, the One, the Almighty, and All-Merciful. Blessings and peace be upon Prophet Muhammad, the last of His Messengers and Prophets, and upon his family, his Companions and all those who follow in his footsteps until the end of time.

Islam is definitely the fastest growing religion worldwide, with many individuals reverting to the true religion.

The author of this book is also a revert and has expressed her thoughts articulately on Islam and its different teachings. She has also identified many points of objection against Islam and answered them convincingly. Her very personal narrative highlights the great blessing that Muslims have in the form of their religion.

May Allah accept the efforts of all those who contributed to the production of this book, and may it be acceptable to Him, *âmeen*.

Muhammad 'Abdul Mohsin Al-Tuwaijri

Managing Director
International Islamic Publishing House
Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

PREFACE

*D*espite a broad, concerted effort to vilify Islam and Muslims, the religion of peace continues to spread like wildfire. Islam literally means ‘peaceful submission to the will of God’. It was the way of Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus (peace be upon them).

Instead of defending Islam against what it is **not** — specifically, that it is neither a religion of violence and cruelty, nor is it oppressive to women — I set out to describe what Islam **is**, in a style fellow Westerners will be able to relate to and appreciate. Readers will benefit from the direct, informative approach. Those who are unfamiliar with the basic tenets of Islam, those for whom the book has been written, will feel eager to learn more about this greatly misunderstood faith. Most readers will readily admit that Islam has remained obscure for too long. As they discover true Islam, they will also discover the truth about themselves and will come to realise why so many people have adopted this faith as their own.

Ignorance is, by far, the greatest barrier to progress and success; false information can prove even worse. It is one thing to not know and quite another to believe that one already knows. Americans, myself included, have been fed lies and deception about Islam our whole lives. While we would like to remain informed, we are often unable to separate truth from falsehood.

People come onto the platform of life knowing virtually nothing — in a state of complete ignorance. As young children, we rely upon parents, teachers, friends, priests, rabbis, or other authority figures for an understanding of the world around us. What if they themselves are clueless? What if, despite their best efforts, they just could not steer us straight? We would ultimately be lost, wouldn’t we? Thus, we find

ourselves in the dire circumstances we are in today. There is widespread fear, ignorance, apathy and heedlessness among humankind. Everyone wants to get ahead, but very few people know how. How do we extricate ourselves from our present woes? How can we restore a sense of purpose, balance, and direction to our lives? Firstly, we must replace ignorance and fear with knowledge and conviction, heedlessness with correct vision, and apathy with compassion and love.

I am a well-wisher of humanity. It is my ardent desire to see the world emerge from its present state of stagnation and degradation. May this book serve the purpose for which it has been written.

WHY ISLAM?

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful

INTRODUCTION

Islam is, by far, the fastest-growing religion worldwide, attracting followers all over the globe. Some estimates say that by the year 2020, Muslims will make up nearly half of all Europeans, not to mention a substantial part of the population of the Americas. Why are so many people flocking to this once totally misunderstood religion? I can give you a firsthand account. I recognised the truth in Islam when I was nineteen years old. It literally turned my life upside down, or actually, right side up.

I have always been an extremely sensitive, serious person. That's not to say I don't know how to have fun and enjoy myself. By serious, I mean I take life seriously. I know when to joke and when to stop. There is a time for fun and games, but not when your life is in shambles and you cannot seem to get through the day without a chemically-induced boost. That's not fun. That is evading the problem. I like to face my problems head-on. I knew I was not enjoying my life, so I tried to find out why. To have fun and really enjoy yourself, I discovered, you must not feel the need to escape from your existence, but rather to claim it.

It is ironic that the most highly advanced country in the world also boasts some of the highest rates of clinical depression, lunacy, suicide, violent crime, divorce and incarceration. Obviously, technological advancement has done nothing to curb these troubling social trends.

Americans are as unsure of themselves as ever. They suffer from more psychological ailments than ever, and these ailments are increasing. Americans are groping in the darkness of ignorance and misinformation, despite being more knowledgeable and enlightened than ever before. Why does such a dichotomy exist? What could possibly explain why, as the quality of life has gone up, the quality of our existence has gone down at almost the same frantic rate? Our grandparents did not have cell phones, computers, or satellite TV. Nevertheless, they were psychologically more grounded than we are. What does that tell us? Must material progress have a direct negative impact on our life? Would we be better off without it?

How can we account for the erosion of our value system, as Americans, over the past fifty years? Behaviours that were once considered despicable and socially unacceptable by the majority have now become the norm. If you object to them, you are considered a homophobe or a freak. This is true for all mores, from promiscuity to homosexuality, gender identity to racism and prejudice, even to issues regarding our religious and moral beliefs. They have all become permeated with doubt, confusion and a glaring lack of clarity.

People are so put off by the question of religion, in particular, that they would rather not discuss it at all. Why is this so, when it is the single most important matter worth considering? Look at the statistics. They point to a definite and severe decline in nearly all aspects of life. People have lost their moral compass. Such loosening of values has unleashed a whole host of undesirable effects. Perhaps the social decline that has occurred and continues to occur has nothing to do with technological advancement in itself. The downfall

may have occurred anyway. Maybe it just happened to coincide with recent scientific discoveries and innovations. Is that a plausible conclusion? Wouldn't you expect such discoveries to have at least some positive impact on society? After all, progress, by definition, should bring about positive change, shouldn't it? However, it has yet to do so. Why? The fact is the two are completely unrelated. Having an iPod never makes someone feel more complete, just as having a phonograph never did, back in the days of old. This is a universal law. Material goods, however attractive and irresistible they seem to be, can never fulfil a spiritual need. Happiness, sadness, despondency, delight and psychological wellbeing are all functions of the spirit. As such, they can only be attained through spiritual means. Material goods only provide temporary relief for the hunger pangs of an impoverished soul. They give little bursts of energy here and there, but they never constitute a full, nutritious meal.

The reality is that human beings are made up of two distinct components: body and soul. The body has certain obvious needs, as does the soul. However, what nourishes the body can never nourish the soul, and vice versa. You cannot give someone a hamburger and expect his heartache to go away, any more than you can give someone a sincere, heartfelt talk and expect it to provide him with physical nourishment. Some might argue that it is obvious that food cannot bring about emotional wellbeing, but other material goods might. "My CD player makes me happy and relieves stress, as does my BlackBerry. I love my new outfit. That car is all I ever want or need." How long does all this last? This kind of temporary, worldly, fluctuating happiness differs from permanent peace of mind and long-term satisfaction of the soul. It comes and goes unsteadily, like a feather in the wind: here one moment; gone the next.

All our stuff, the consumer goods are rather like a temporary fix for a chronic condition. They are like putting a band-aid on a fatal wound. Relying on material goods for happiness is like giving a starving person a few peanuts to stave off their hunger. They will

provide momentary relief, but will do nothing to combat the underlying distress. Emotional voids require emotional fulfillment. Physical deficiencies are filled through physical means. No physical object can ever satisfy the needs of the soul. To be psychologically sound and healthy, people must nourish their souls just as they nourish their bodies. Unfortunately, it seems to me that Americans have limited practice in this area. They are at odds on how to satisfy their spiritual cravings; they mostly ignore them and suffer the consequences. Many will visit psychiatrist after psychiatrist, to no avail. If they could overcome this one seemingly insurmountable barrier, they would rise to greatness and become an actual superpower in the real sense of the word. I hope this book will help them to do so.

THE DECEPTION

Americans, from the time we are born, come into immediate contact with the crude, harsh world of base materialism. Our whole society is based on the idea that making money is the number one goal, even if our morals are compromised in the process. Our society is rather unique in that respect. We grow up memorising popular TV jingles, believing that these products will brighten up our otherwise dreary days. We are bombarded with media messages that constantly inform us that we are not good enough — unless, of course, we own a pair of designer jeans or we use a certain brand of this or that. We are made to feel inferior, incomplete and inadequate from early on. These intimidation tactics have disastrous effects on the soul. However, the fact that we are able to come out of it okay (barring a few scars and scratches), realising the falsity of material attraction, is an indication that there is yet another reality altogether.

We are given mixed messages regarding a whole host of moral issues and social norms, to the extent that it is no longer possible to

distinguish what is right from what is wrong. These social norms are ever changing. If you grew up in the fifties, you would balk at the idea of an unmarried girl getting pregnant; today, the stigma is all but gone. Drinking alcohol was once prohibited in the United States, but despite its known detrimental effects, it is widely in demand today. Not only is it acceptable, but it is a necessary part of many peoples' lives. Name one dying man who ever claimed that alcohol was the key to his success, or that it had been a blessing for him or his family or had brought any good to his life at all. The same can be said for cigarettes, drugs, and all other intoxicants. They bring nothing but harm and ruin. They are poisons. Sadly, most people can no longer differentiate between what is good and bad or what is helpful and useless, or perhaps they have an aversion to facing reality. The fact is drugs and alcohol never brought anyone an iota of real benefit. People who abuse them eventually wind up in rehabilitation, only to intoxicate themselves once again, and the cycle continues.

The prevalence of drug and alcohol abuse in society is an urgent warning sign. It indicates that we are starving emotionally. We are trying to fill an all-important spiritual void with a quick fix. We are in such dire need of that fix that we will try almost anything, even if it has proven to be ineffective time after time. We are trying to substitute peanuts for a truly satisfying nutrition of the soul, something which never comes from a bottle or a carton. It cannot be bought, sold, or even seen. However, a lack of it has evident, tangible effects that can be detected all around us. We must wake up if we are to rid ourselves of this terrible, debilitating condition. We are not destined to stay this way forever. There is light at the end of the tunnel.

Our souls need enrichment; that much is undeniable. But how do we enrich our souls after we have spent our whole lives denying them? Where do we start? Not only must we begin to care for our souls, we must try to undo the years of abuse and neglect that have weighed so heavily upon us. We have left our most basic needs

untended, and for this, we are paying a high price. We know how to send a man to the moon, but we do not even know how to make him smile. We have not been able to solve the ongoing mystery of life. We have yet to crack the code of our existence. In fact, living in our society, you would think that it was a puzzle that could never be solved.

Ask any Muslims, though, and they will tell you a very different story; they have solved the puzzle.

THE DECEPTION UNFOLDED

If you were to study Islam from a purely social standpoint, analysing its efficacy in dealing with social issues only, you would discover its remarkable ability to solve society's most pressing ills. Anyone can check out this fact. All serious scholars have come to similar conclusions. Even Islam's detractors would have to admit that putting Islam into practice would eradicate the major problems of the world today. This will continue to be true for as long as human beings live, because the religion of Islam is the last and final revelation sent to humankind by God Almighty. Humanity will receive no further guidance from above. Divine inspiration ceased with the passing of our beloved Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ). This is what Islam teaches.

Islam is no more than a continuation and a completion of the previous messages of Judaism and Christianity. It is not a completely new religion, nor is it borrowed. It is the same religion, with the same message, that was brought by Moses, Jesus, Noah and Abraham (peace be upon them all). It is often called 'the religion of human nature' in Arabic. These prophets were all Muslims in the sense that a Muslim is anyone who submits to the will of God Almighty, the one true God worthy of our worship. Trees are Muslim. Cows are Muslim. Even the stars and planets, the sun and the moon are Muslim. You too are Muslim if you care to admit it.

The most striking aspect about Islam is that it supports and confirms previous scriptures, never contradicting them, because they actually come from the same source. Followers of previous scriptures deny the message of Islam; this is a crucial mistake on their part. If people took the time to study, they would discover that their own scriptures actually foretell the coming of a man in Arabia at about the same time as Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ). In fact, the Jews of his time were actively awaiting the arrival of a prophet. While they recognised him as a prophet, they did not believe in his message.

In reality, it makes little difference if he came from the East or from the West, from amongst the noble or amongst the poor, from this tribe or that tribe. What matters is that God sent him with the truth. What matters is that he was sent as a mercy to the worlds, to the people of his time, our time and all times. What matters is that he brought light and guidance; whoever follows that light will be successful both here and in the hereafter. Little else matters. Doesn't God know best with whom to place His message? How can anyone claim to know better?

Racial pride and arrogance have no place in Islam. It is considered a cardinal sin to be proud and vain and to think of yourself as being better or more deserving than someone else. Who knows? Maybe, in actuality, that person is better than you are. This blind arrogance was the reason for the fall of Satan, when he puffed himself up with pride and refused to bow down to Adam ('alayhi as-salâm — peace be upon him), as God had ordered him to do. This haughtiness has been the reason for the fall of many human beings ever since. It is one of the most inexcusable, reprehensible characteristics of human beings, according to Islam: blind arrogance and refusal to admit to clear and obvious facts. God commands; we obey. It is as simple as that.

However, Satan did not stop there. He grew even more proud and pitted his will against Adam's, vowing to bring down as many of

Adam's offspring as possible. His dupes would be disgraced in this world and even more so in the hereafter. This would be an apt punishment for their refusal to believe and submit to divine law.

Disbelief in God is actually an innovation of Satan. It has no place in reality. It is a trick played on the innocent sons of Adam (ﷺ). Satan whispers words of disbelief into the ears of humanity to incite doubt, fear, confusion and unrest. He plots to make them unmindful or unconscious of their Creator. On the Day of Judgement, Satan will finally confess and declare in front of everyone that he has been deluding them all along. He will deny any responsibility for anything they ever did or said.

He will absolve himself of all guilt, leaving you in the lurch alone. Satan is his name, and misleading people is his game. If you come to know more about him and are aware of his tactics, you will be better able to avoid him. This is the best advice anyone can ever offer you. It will lead to your permanent peace of mind and sanity, both in this life and the next. This is not just empty rhetoric; it contains both truth and reason. It is the truth of our very existence. It is the reason the world is in such ruin today. Yet people rarely take heed, or else they are oblivious. Islam warns humanity that Satan is our open enemy.

You can usually tell when you are being accosted by Satan. He suggests things that make you feel ashamed, impure, afraid, unclean, inferior, or otherwise uncomfortable. There is an Arabic saying: "Nothing is strange [foreign to our natures] except the whisperings of the devil." This means that all other sensations or emotions or good thoughts are the only real ones. Satanic suggestions carry no weight. They are empty promises, mere delusions, and figments of the imagination.

We were born knowing only one reality and feeling good about it. We were born to recognise our Creator and find peace and solace in believing in Him. Any idea to the contrary is against our very

nature, against reason and logic, against all correct calculations of truth and justice. As Muslims, we are supposed to resist that satanic urge, or incitement to evil, whenever it comes to us. “I take refuge in God from Satan, the accursed,” is what Muslims say at the slightest provocation.

If you have a bad dream, Islam teaches, you automatically know it is from Satan, so you are not supposed to repeat it to anyone or give it any thought. You are supposed to spit dryly in the air three times, as if to show your disgust, then turn over to sleep on your other side. You must also seek refuge in God from Satan before sleeping, and at other specified times, such as when reading from the holy book, the Qur'an, when praying (at the start of every prayer), or upon entering the bathroom, a place of impurity. Islam has a prayer or supplication to be recited for practically every situation in life. It teaches us what to say before leaving the house, when returning, when starting out on a journey, or when burdened with a calamity or misfortune.

Islam teaches its followers to exercise patience and fortitude during times of hardship and to never despair or lose faith. God promises to always be with those who patiently persevere. Islam even teaches us what to say in the grave after we die, when the angels prop us up and ask whom we used to worship, what religion we followed, and what the name of our final Prophet (ﷺ) was.

The answers are simple, of course, but just knowing that one has a prepared response and has done his or her lifelong homework relieves a believer's stress, since there are certainly no questions more important than these.

Muslims are (ideally) never burdened with undue fear, worry or anxiety about tomorrow or with misgivings about yesterday. Everything is taken in stride. Muslims know they are on the right path. They have no doubts whatsoever. This is what most appealed to me about being a Muslim: sharing in that certainty of faith. They know they are living the truth. They are as sure of the presence of

God as they are sure of themselves. After all, where would any of us be without His grace, His mercy, His sustenance, His light, His truth, His generosity, and His awesome power to create? These qualities, unfamiliar to many of us born outside the fold of Islam, become all the more apparent as one's faith evolves.

True believers are always conscious of their position with regard to their Creator. They depend upon God for every need, while God is independent of everything and everyone. Believers know they would never be here had it not been for the divine command:

(سورة يس : ٨٢)

﴿...Be, and it is.﴾

﴿كُنْ فَيَكُونُ﴾

(Qur'an 36: 82)¹

It is just that easy for God to create [and destroy] whatever He wills. He has complete control over the entire universe. His command is always obeyed. His will is constantly being executed. He sends His orders by day and by night.

Angels are assigned the task of carrying out the will of God. The highest-ranking angel is Archangel Gabriel. The angels hear and obey God in everything. They shirk no responsibility. God created angels without a will of their own. They cannot disobey God and thus will not be taken to account. They can do no harm or wrong. Animals fall under the same category of beings; they have no independent will and as such, they have no interests beyond eating, drinking and staying alive. At the end of time, they will not be taken to account either, and will be reduced to mere dust.

Human beings have been given free will; thus, they differ from both angels and animals. Through their actions, they may prove to be either better than the angels above or worse than the lowest beasts.

¹ The translations of the meanings of the verses of the Qur'an in this book have been combined [with some changes to the text] from the translations of 'Abdullâh Yusuf Ali, Dr. M. Muhsin Khan, Şâheeh International and Shâkir.

They are expected to use the faculties of reasoning and sound judgement that they have been endowed with. The first responsibility for them is to recognise their Creator and Sustainer, and then to serve Him in the most perfect way possible. Once faith, meaning a correct understanding of God, is firmly ingrained in their hearts and minds, they will be better able to carry out their noble task.

We have been created to be God's vicegerents on earth: His deputies, if you will. Islam teaches us that we were created for one reason only: to serve God. After acknowledging His existence and His sole right to be worshipped, we are expected to offer Him exclusive devotion. One of the oft-repeated verses of the noble Qur'an is the one in which God says:

﴿وَمَا خَلَقْتُ الْجِنَّ وَالْإِنْسَ إِلَّا لِيَعْبُدُونَ﴾ (٥٦) 

﴿I created the jinn and humankind only that they might worship Me.﴾
(Qur'an 51: 56)

It sums up, in a few short words, the entire meaning of our existence.

This does not mean that we are to worship God on the side, part time, perhaps on Fridays² only, in addition to all our other functions as human beings, with all our various duties and obligations. We are expected to fulfil all of these, too, but worshipping God should be our primary consideration. It should supersede all other worldly concerns. It is our *raison d'être*, or reason for being, as they say. We were created exclusively for that purpose.

It is the privilege of Muslims to know exactly what our purpose in life is. We thank God for this greatest of all privileges! How refreshing it is to know we have not been left clueless, without a

² Friday is a special day for Muslims. It is their weekly Eid 'celebration' or holiday. Men are required to attend the Friday sermon and pray in congregation. However, there are no restrictions on working on Fridays or in seeking one's livelihood.

guide or a path to follow. Because it is such an innate part of our human nature to be monotheistic, people who were raised as Muslims are often taken aback by the prevalence of disbelief in the West. To them, it is so obvious there is one God that it is taken for granted as an undeniable fact. Satan never assaulted them and told them differently, and they wouldn't even have lent him an ear if he had. They inherited the religion of their ancestors, and it turned out to be the correct one. Moreover, the religion of Islam is perfectly in line with our natural tendencies as human beings, permitting only what is pure and prohibiting only what may harm us. These Muslims, who have lived their entire life knowing only Islam, wonder what keeps most Westerners, the *kuffâr* (literally, those who cover up the truth), from believing. Can we not see the beauty, order and perfection of the universe? They see non-believers as ingrates, enjoying all of God's amenities but paying Him no heed, devotion or gratitude. Most Westerners, I suspect, would jump at the chance to worship their Lord, Creator and Sustainer, but they must be provided with logical proof first. We are not ungrateful; we are unmindful. We have been asleep, comatose, in a long deep stupor. We have not done the proper research or thought seriously about the matter. We would rather relegate it to the world of fancy or put it on the back burner. Let us bring it right up front for a moment. Let us consider what Muslims have to say about the matter, because they seem to be onto something.

THE ISLAMIC CREED

*M*uslims believe that God revealed the Qur'an, the holy book of Islam, to Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ), an illiterate desert-dwelling Arab from the tribe of *Quraysh* (the dominant tribe in Makkah at the time, whose society was based on polytheism) beginning in 610 CE. Divine revelation continued to descend intermittently over the next twenty-three years, until the Qur'an was finally complete in 632 CE. Throughout the period of revelation, various events and

circumstances would present themselves; through these, the Prophet (ﷺ) demonstrated to his followers how to apply Islam, showing them what to do in every conceivable situation. In a relatively short span of time, he was able to unify the diverse and errant tribes of Arabia under the banner of *Lâ ilâha illâ Allâh*, known as the *kalima*, or the word: “There is no deity worthy of worship except God,” or Allah (ﷻ) in Arabic. One of the last verses to be revealed was this one, in which God says:

﴿... الْيَوْمَ أَكَلَّتْ لَكُمْ دِينَكُمْ وَأَنْتُمْ عَنِّيْكُمْ نَعْمَى وَرَضِيْتُ لَكُمُ الْإِسْلَامَ﴾
 (سورة المائدة: ٣) دِينَا ... ﴿٣﴾

﴿...This day, I have perfected your religion for you, completed My favour upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your way of life...﴾ (Qur'an 5: 3)

Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) completed his mission and died shortly thereafter. He left behind the richest legacy of any one human being who lived on the earth from the beginning of time until today. Billions of people attest to his sincerity and try to emulate him in everything he said and did. They do so out of love and respect for his noble, genuine character. He was truly a model, an ideal example for all of humanity to follow.

Before his mission even started, Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) had a reputation for being honest and reliable; hence he was given the title *al-ameen*, meaning ‘the trustworthy’ in Arabic. It was this quality of devotion and sincerity that attracted the attention of his first wife Khadeejah (*radiya Allâhu 'anhâ* — may Allah be pleased with her). She actually proposed to him based on the findings of a report that described him as possessing impeccable manners.³ He accepted her

³ Khadeejah (رضي الله عنها) had sent a servant of hers, Maysara, on a trading expedition during which he was able to observe the Prophet's behaviour. When he came back with a flawless report, she realised that not only was Muhammad (ﷺ) an exemplary merchant, but that he would also make the best of husbands. (Safi-ur-

proposal, and they got married in 595 CE. This marriage produced six children: four daughters and two sons, both of whom died in infancy.

The Prophet's whole life was an affirmation of his sincerity. He never claimed to be anything more than he was: a pure and honest warner — no more, no less. He never claimed to have divinity or to have a share in divine power or knowledge. In fact, he vehemently opposed such blasphemy. If he had had such powers, he would have warded off all evil from himself, procured much wealth, and prevented any calamity from ever touching him. However, as we know, he suffered many hardships: both personal losses, like the death of his beloved sons and his dear wife Khadeejah (رضي الله عنها), and hardships related to his mission.

He continuously admonished people against venerating any part of God's creation. A total eclipse of the sun occurred shortly after the death of his son, Ibrâheem, and people wondered if there was a correlation between the two incidents. He could have capitalised on the event; instead, he emphatically denied any relationship between natural occurrences and the birth or death of ordinary human beings. We are only to bow down to God, the Creator of all. Many injunctions in Islam relate to the undisputed oneness of God and His sole right to be worshipped. They warn us against ascribing partners with God. These revered people or objects, such as the idols of pre-Islamic Arabia, can bring neither benefit nor harm. All power is with God alone. He is the only one who can provide for us or deprive us; no one can change a divine decree once it has been given. When He wills something, God simply says, 'Be,' and it is.

Those who associate partners with God are immediately rendered outside the fold of Islam until they repent and testify to the

oneness of God again. This and, of course, the complete denial of God, are the only two unforgivable sins in Islam. They require immediate repentance.

(سورة آل عمران : ١٠٢)

﴿... وَلَا تَمُوتُنَّ إِلَّا وَأَنْتُمْ مُشْلِمُونَ ﴾
[١٠٢]

﴿...die not, except in a state of Islam.﴾

(Qur'an 3: 102)

All other sins, which are less than these two in severity, carry the possibility, indeed the probability, of forgiveness from God. After all, God is the Oft-Forgiving, most Merciful and Compassionate.

THE FALLACY OF DISBELIEF

*A*s for the disbelievers who refuse to believe in the oneness or the monotheistic nature of God, ask them a few questions. Inquire of them: "Do you claim then that Prophet Muhammad personally authored the Qur'an and made up the religion of Islam?" Ask them if they have done any research into the topic. Tell them: "Apparently not, because if you had, you would realise that you were ascribing to him a much greater miracle than if you had just accepted that they came from God." Could a mere mortal have produced the likes of the Qur'an? It is a challenge explicitly stated in the Qur'an, and it has not been met by anyone yet. The Qur'an is an indisputable, unique, timeless miracle. It is perfection. It is both simple and complex at the same time. People have written volumes upon volumes about one single verse. Scholars of the Arabic language (both Arabs and non-Arabs) have studied it extensively and declared it a wonder of succinctness and eloquence that cannot be explained except by admitting its 'supernatural' origin. Not only has no one ever been able to produce the likes of the Qur'an or anything superior to it, they have not even been able to produce a single verse of comparable quality, even though the Arabs have always been highly skilled poets and linguists. Therefore, whether you claim Muhammad (ﷺ)

produced it or someone else did, there must have been divine intervention along the way.

Apart from being a linguistic miracle, the Qur'an also contains information that no seventh century illiterate, uneducated desert Arab could have possibly known. How could a mere human being have fabricated such a comprehensive, structured, balanced way of life as we find in Islam, paying perfect attention to both the physical and spiritual dimensions of humans? Could a human mind have come up with solutions to all of humanity's most enigmatic problems, from the distant past to the present day?

Let us imagine for a brief moment, for the sake of argument, that Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) did write the Qur'an himself, with or without the help of someone else. Let us consider the Qur'an from such an angle; that it had a human origin. First of all, the Qur'an itself mentions the fact that if it had come from other than God, it would have contained many contradictions; yet we cannot find a single contradiction or discrepancy therein. This is especially amazing because the Qur'an was revealed at various times and under different and ever-changing circumstances. In addition, the Qur'an actually condemns or criticises certain actions of the Prophet (ﷺ). Would any prophet, or any human being for that matter, criticise his own actions and then record that in a book that is to be considered sacred and preserved throughout the ages? It seems unlikely. Thirdly, as we mentioned, the Qur'an was revealed in stages. The first divine commandment sent to Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ), when he was alone meditating in a cave, was:

(سورة العلق : ١)

﴿أَقْرِبْ يَاسِرَ رَبِّكَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ﴾

﴿Read! In the name of your Lord, Who created.﴾ (*Qur'an 96: 1*)

This verse frightened the Prophet (ﷺ) terribly; he thought he had been possessed by the devil and ran to his wife Khadeejah (رضي الله عنها) for comfort. After this first revelation, there was a lapse of over two years

during which no subsequent revelation was sent down. Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) was left utterly perplexed. If he had been the author, he could have produced volumes during that span of time. However, he was simply waiting for the voice to come back. It was the voice of Gabriel, who returned two years later to instruct him:

(سورة المدثر : ٢)



﴿Arise and warn!﴾

(Qur'an 74: 2)

He listened and he obeyed; this was the start of his great mission.

The Qur'an could not have been the product of a mortal mind. Do mortals have access to the unseen, knowing what took place before their time and what is going to happen afterwards? Those who make such a claim have clearly not studied the Qur'an thoroughly. Their opinions should be disregarded altogether. They are pseudo-scholars. Those who take it upon themselves to discuss the authenticity of the Qur'an should at least have the basic knowledge of what it contains. They should meet basic eligibility requirements. They should know that all the predictions made in the noble Qur'an have eventually come true. They say that Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) authored it? Let us see for ourselves.

The Qur'an correctly stated that the earth was a sphere, but not a perfect sphere: it is egg-shaped, to be exact. This is in accordance with known facts. The equator bulges out, just like an egg. The Qur'an maintains that the sun and the moon follow prescribed courses:

﴿لَا أَنْشَمُسْ يَنْبَغِي لَهَا أَنْ تُدْرِكَ الْقَمَرَ وَلَا أَتَيْلُ سَابِقُ الْنَّهَارِ وَلَكُلُّ فِي فَلَكٍ﴾

(سورة يس : ٤٠)



﴿It is not allowable for the sun that it should overtake the moon, nor can the night outstrip the day, and each is swimming in an orbit.﴾

(Qur'an 36: 40)

It revealed that all living things originated from water. This too has been verified by science. Was it just an educated guess? Granted, one or two correct guesses could be random, educated guesses, but could all Qur'anic observations have been so?

The Qur'an correctly identifies the male, or rather his sperm, as containing the sex-determining factor for the unborn child, not the ovum from the mother.

﴿وَأَنَّهُ خَلَقَ الْزَوْجَيْنِ الذَّكَرَ وَالْأُنثَى﴾ (٤٥) مِنْ نُطْفَةٍ إِذَا تَعْنَى

(سورة النجم: ٤٦-٤٥)

﴿And He creates the pairs, male and female, from a sperm drop when it is emitted.﴾ (Qur'an 53: 45-46)

The ovum, as we know, is neutral, carrying an X chromosome; it has no bearing on the sex of the newborn. Throughout history, in societies where male children were preferred, women have been blamed for producing female children; however, an uneducated desert Arab from the seventh century knew the truth.

The Qur'an describes the foetus starting out as a clinging, leech-like clot, resembling a chewed substance, attached to the wall of the mother's uterus, sucking nutrition from her, much like a leech does. This is in accordance with today's known facts. It then goes on to describe the stages of embryonic development. The foetus is enveloped in three shrouds of darkness: the abdomen, the uterus and the amniotic sac. As the skeletal system develops, the bones become 'clothed with flesh', exactly as the Qur'an states:

﴿خَلَقْنَا الْنُطْفَةَ عَلَقَةً فَخَلَقْنَا الْعَلَقَةَ مُضْكَةً فَخَلَقْنَا الْمُضْكَةَ عِظَمًا فَكَسَوْنَا الْعِظَمَ لَحْمًا ثُمَّ أَنْشَأْنَاهُ خَلْقًا مَاءِرًا فَتَبَارَكَ اللَّهُ أَحْسَنُ الْخَلَقِينَ﴾

(سورة المؤمنون: ١٤)



﴿Then We made the sperm into a clot of congealed blood; then of that clot We made a lump; then we made out of that lump bones and

clothed the bones with flesh; then we developed out of it another creature. So blessed be Allah, the best to create!» (*Qur'an* 23: 14)

Some people express their wonder at God's ability to create and recreate, but the Qur'an refutes the doubters' argument with the following:

(سورة القيمةة : ٤)

﴿كَلَّا قَدِيرِينَ عَلَىٰ أَنْ شُوَّهَ بَنَائِهِ،﴾

﴿Yes, We are able to put together in perfect order the tips of his fingers.﴾ (*Qur'an* 75: 4)

This verse is in reference to the pagan Arabs during the time of the Prophet (ﷺ). They expressed doubts about God's ability to resurrect after death. They dug up an old bone, crushed it to powder and said: "Are you telling us that your God can reconstruct our decayed bodies after we have been dead and buried for centuries?" Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) reassured them [according to Ibn Hishâm] that He who created them the first time would have no difficulty putting them back together again.

Why does the Qur'an call special attention to our fingertips? Fingerprinting techniques were unknown to the Arabs during the time of the Prophet (ﷺ). Little did they know that everyone had a unique pattern of grooves on their fingers. This information, which at the time attracted no particular attention, would later prove to be effective in fighting crime. Critics of Islam have not been able to explain away all the truths mentioned in the glorious Qur'an. At best, they have categorised them as wanderings of the mind, maintaining that the tenets of Islam are absurd and antiquated. They are neither, as we will come to see.

The Qur'an offers the best deterrent for fighting crime. If it is theft, the hand of the thief is to be cut off, unless of course he or she was compelled to steal out of a desperate need. This severe punishment may sound barbaric. Muslims believe a world full of thieves and pickpockets is even more barbaric. Carry out this punishment once or twice, and you will find a dramatic decrease in

such barbarism. Islam never allows base desires to rule. Stealing is wrong. It is a blatant form of treachery and betrayal. Nothing could be further from Islamic values. Theft is an unacceptable, inexcusable violation of another person's rights. Islam always protects individuals, especially the meek and the underprivileged. Their rights are inviolable.

Muslims, indeed all human beings, are supposed to form a fellowship, with their blood, property and honour being sacred among each other. Anyone who violates that sanctity will be punished severely. Just as God is merciful, compassionate and loving towards us, He is also strict and severe in punishment. He does not condone mutual oppression. He enjoins only what is good and forbids what is evil. True, His mercy always precedes His wrath, but when His wrath is justified, it comes down hard on a person, both in this life and in the next. Could Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) have devised such a well-balanced system, and if he could have, who must have inspired him?

Does Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) have the power or authority to cast punishment on anyone? Moreover, if he once had such powers, where is he now? Why do we find those who sin and deviate from the straight path, from his correct *Sunnah* [the practice and collected sayings of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) that together with the Qur'an forms the basis of Islamic law] or way, suffering from severe mental anguish and emotional instability due to their heavy consciences and feelings of being lost? How could he have predicted as much? Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) lived for only sixty-three years, but the will of the God that he preached about is still being carried out. The self-torture/self-reckoning the Prophet (ﷺ) informed us of (which we could call our conscience pricking us) when describing the self-reproaching soul, is a type of warning that God sends to people; thus, He gives them a chance to turn to Him once more and repent. That emptiness and guilt that I myself felt, and countless others feel, must be a hard trial, or else none of us would ever return to the path.

THE TRUE MUSLIM CHARACTER

A Muslim who steals is a contradiction in terms. So is a Muslim who drinks alcohol, who commits fornication, who lies, who cheats, who mistreats his or her parents, who earns an illegal income, who gives or takes bribes, who usurps the inheritance of orphans, who denies his obligation to his or her spouse or children, who blasphemes, who slanders, who terrorises, or who transgresses any of the limits set by God Almighty. These limits are set for our own good, both individually and collectively. Islam is a complete system, not a religion to be practiced half-heartedly, on the weekend only or when time permits. It is not just a hobby or a nice pastime. It is an all-encompassing way of life. It includes everything that a person needs to know from birth up until death. For the Muslim, there is no dichotomy between secular and divine, between worldly and spiritual. We exist in both 'worlds' simultaneously. Everything that we do in our worldly life can be an act of devotion to God and can, therefore, be taken to a spiritual level. We are both body and soul, each one in the service of the other.

To take an example, do you enjoy eating? If you eat with the intention of building your body up strong, so you can be a better, healthier, more productive servant of God, then kudos to you. God will appreciate your efforts and reward you accordingly. Just don't go overboard, because there are injunctions about limiting your food intake to one-third of your stomach.

Regarding this book, for example, or any serious undertaking, in Islam we understand that everything we do will be judged by our intention. This means that God will look into our hearts, the seat of our intentions, and judge us according to what we desire to achieve (whether or not we actually accomplish it). The reason is so that we may receive due reward or punishment for all our deeds,

notwithstanding the outcome. If the desire is sincere, moreover, we will surely do our best to act upon it.

Therefore, if I intended to write this book to make money and get famous, that is, solely for a worldly purpose, I would be rewarded accordingly. If I received the glitter and glamour in this life, and I forgot my original intentions, my reward would be depleted until perhaps no reward at all would await me in the hereafter. Likewise, if I wrote it to mislead people, I would be punished, and punished severely, because in it, I discuss serious matters of religion. The worst punishment awaits those who blaspheme or speak without knowledge in matters of religion.

But what if I wrote it out of a sincere desire to acquaint people with the beauty and simplicity of Islam? What if I wrote it out of an overwhelming sense of duty and obligation to inform humanity of something they may not be aware of — something that can potentially benefit them greatly? What if I wrote it to awaken the consciences of people all over the world, to point them in the right direction, and to remind them of the inevitable meeting with their Lord, an encounter that they may be oblivious to or heedless of? In that case, God would grant me a commensurate reward. I, personally, would forego any worldly gain if I could guarantee that this effort would touch the heart of just one individual. I would feel that my work had been justified. Just knowing that I had made a difference in one person's life would fill me with overwhelming joy and delight. I am a well-wisher of humanity. I love you all for the sake of God. I pray for the correct guidance of everyone on planet Earth. I write this book with the sole intention of lifting the cloud of gloom that seems to have descended upon the religion of Islam, so that its beauty may shine forth for all to see.

The Prophet (ﷺ) said: «None of you [truly] believes until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself.» (Bukhari and Muslim)

THE CURE

Muslims are generally free from the psychological ailments that tend to plague Western nations. You will find the rates of depression, phobias, anxiety, lunacy, instability, irrationality and other common mental disorders to be very low among Muslims. Muslims are generally stable, on an even keel. They see life in its true perspective and in its totality. Muslims are, above all, realistic; they are aware of the fragile nature of life and of death. This is even true among non-practicing Muslims. Nominal Muslims know they are in grave error, behaving defiantly, yet they continue to enjoy peace of mind by being semi-conscious believers in God. God is testing them, to be sure. A verse from the holy Qur'an explains this phenomenon. We must delve into its wider meaning, because as usual, Qur'anic wisdom is packed into a few words. A question is posed:

﴿... هُل يَسْتَوِي الَّذِينَ يَعْلَمُونَ وَالَّذِينَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ...﴾
 ﴿...Are those who know equal to those who know not?...﴾

(Qur'an 39: 9)

It is a rhetorical question needing no answer. What is the deeper meaning behind this seemingly straightforward inquiry?

This verse is telling us that there are basically two categories of people: those who know, meaning those who are firm in their convictions about God, those who believe in the promise of their Lord unseen and expect to meet Him one day. Then there are those who do not know, either out of a refusal to believe or else out of ignorance and misinformation. The latter is the condition of most people in the West. Many of them have not necessarily refused belief, but they have not done the research either. They will be held accountable because they have been given the ways and means of knowing. It is up to them to seek the truth. If they were blessed to find it, I believe they would have no problem giving up the falsity of their present life for the

certainty of the other. Unlike the animals and the angels, human beings will be taken to task for all their actions. In reality, not much is expected of us except that we acknowledge our Lord and worship Him alone. Muslims are stable for that very reason; they don't live a dual existence with their bodies going in one direction and their souls in another. They do not have split personalities, owing allegiance to various and diverse gods⁴ all around them.

Muslims acknowledge one God, with one heart in their chests, one mind in their heads and one single objective in mind: to gain the pleasure of their Lord. This is the unspoken desire of all true, pious Muslims. They hope to gain the pleasure of the Creator, Who provided all they have.

The psychological wellbeing of the Muslim does not just originate from acknowledging our Creator and submitting to His will. This is a starting point, a general prerequisite. It is also a prerequisite for happiness on any level. Once belief is in place, even in a small, minuscule amount, practicing the religion actually cultivates an ongoing sense of wellbeing and satisfaction in the Muslim. Every injunction of Islam found in the Qur'an and the *Hadith* [the collected statements and actions of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ)], the two authentic sources of knowledge and information about the religion, is in place to make life better and easier for the believer. This is true without exception. Every piece of advice or command in Islam, if followed properly, will build a stronger, more effective individual and in turn, society.

Islam goes further than that. It goes further than simply commanding what is right and forbidding what is wrong. It gives lessons in real-life psychology, in the art of relieving undue stress and

⁴ 'Gods' here means controlling forces or influences in the environment that people unwittingly submit to (as mentioned in the preface), such as parents, teachers, social norms, societal pressures, media, friends, family and even one's own base desires.

anxiety. It gives actual advice, relayed by the Messenger (ﷺ), teaching us how to avoid negative emotions or stressful situations before they even happen. In a way, then, Islam contains a pre-emptive strategy for dealing with the whole range of human emotions. The body of authentic, reliable literature about Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) shows that Muhammad (ﷺ) was a model father, husband, teacher, warrior, water conservationist, human rights activist, social reformer, revolutionary, and leader; it seems we should give him the credentials of a professional psychologist as well.

Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) taught us that God created us and that only He knows where all benefit and harm lay. No human being has that prerogative. God, who fashioned our souls, knows exactly what is good for them and what is not good. Only He could have devised the foolproof system found in the Qur'an and Sunnah, which is designed to preserve our sense of wellbeing. God is not a tyrant and intends no harm towards anyone. He is, on the contrary, the most Beneficent, most Merciful. God has a divine wisdom behind everything He permits and prohibits. A bit of wise thinking on our part will prove it.

Islam teaches us to look at those who are less fortunate than we are, when comparing lots. It is human nature for us to constantly compare ourselves and our situations with others, even if we do so subconsciously. If we train ourselves to consider those who are less fortunate, we will feel much more grateful for what we have and much more relieved. Conversely, looking at those supposedly above us will only increase our feelings of animosity, jealousy, bitterness, envy, rivalry, inner grief, ingratitude, dissatisfaction and negativity.

Islam allows games but prohibits gambling. It allows trade but disallows usury. Why? Simply put, gambling and usury produce a sense of irresponsibility and disrespect toward wealth and other people. They bring out the baser qualities of human beings. We have a tendency to look at other people as sources of personal gain and

profit, disregarding them as fellow human beings. When you insist on receiving a fixed sum of money, for example, or when you have the odds stacked in your favour, you show no regard for someone as a human being with human limitations, vulnerable to human adversities. Remember that Islam tells us: "No one is a true believer unless he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself." Only an altruist can be a real, true believer. Since you will never find a moneylender or a card dealer with your best interests in mind, both these actions are condemned in Islam.

Islam teaches us that no man and woman can be alone together, except that Satan is the third party. This warning applies, of course, to those who are not lawfully married.⁵ This is simple, clear, undisputable wisdom, a perfect panacea to the problems of today. Illicit relationships outside the bond of marriage are completely condemned by the religion of Islam. As the religion of human nature, Islam forbids anything that is unnatural and destructive to the individual as well as to the broader community (not to mention to the unborn child). Can you think of all the dangers that arise out of unrestricted mixing of men and women? If this one injunction of Islam were to be applied and adhered to in the United States today, what do you think would happen tomorrow? What would happen to rape, to sexual harassment and violence, to illegitimate births, to the heartache and turmoil of broken families and relationships, to our sense of honour as independent, dignified, respectable human beings? Can those involved in illicit relationships truly claim to be independent and to retain their dignity? Lowering yourself to being in an uncommitted love affair is the epitome of servitude and bondage. It is certainly not the sign of a free, independent, self-assured woman or man.

⁵ It also excludes those who are legally barred from marrying each other, like a man and his niece, a woman and her stepson, a father and his daughter-in-law, and others.

Islam does not object to such indiscriminate behaviours in order to oppress us, torture us, or cramp our style — quite the opposite. Islam takes careful account of everything. It recognises our needs and knows that the natural attraction between the sexes is a strong one. God, in fact, has made it so. However, God has also defined a legal, legitimate channel through which to satisfy every single one of our needs. Satisfying them illegitimately will only lead to disgrace. Many Americans today recognise this and know that marriage is the only way to go. In fact, in recent years, young people in schools and colleges in the U.S. have started a programme in which they encourage each other to practice abstinence and to stay celibate until marriage.

There is a *hadith* [a statement or action of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) that was remembered and recorded by his Companions and followers] related to this very concept. Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) once informed his Companions, his first followers, that there would be a reward for gratifying their sexual desire in a lawful manner. The Companions were amazed and wanted to know why they would be rewarded for such an action. The Prophet (ﷺ) replied: «Do you not think that were he to act upon it unlawfully, he would be sinning? Likewise, if he acts upon it lawfully, he will be rewarded.»⁶

GOING BACK TO THE SOURCE

*T*here are two main sources of guidance in Islam: the Qur'an and the Sunnah. We follow both: what is revealed in the holy book of

⁶ «Narrated by Abu Dharr al-Ghifārī (رضي الله عنه): God's Messenger (ﷺ) said: In the sexual act of each of you, there is a praiseworthy act deserving of reward. The Companions asked: O Messenger of God, when one of us fulfills his sexual desire, will he be given a reward for that? To that, he replied: Do you not think that were he to act upon it unlawfully, he would be sinning? Likewise, if he acts upon it lawfully, he will be rewarded.» (Muslim)

Islam, the Qur'an, and what has been preserved of the sayings, actions, and traditions of the Prophet (ﷺ) as people chronicled them throughout his lifetime. These have been collected into statements, called hadiths, which comprise the Sunnah. The two sources are necessary and complementary to each other. For example, in the Qur'an, we are ordered to pray, and we are instructed to make a ritual ablution before prayer. The Sunnah then explains in detail how to pray, how often to pray and how to make the ritual ablution. It also tells us what nullifies the ablution, what to do if no water is available, how much water to use, and about other aspects of ablution.

Most of the advice about reducing stress and mental anguish is found in the Sunnah rather than the Qur'an. Nevertheless, the advice given assumes that you already believe and therefore enjoy some level of tranquillity in your heart. Believers know that God is with them and that He hears the call of anyone supplicating to Him. If you do not have that nominal level of faith in your heart, then the advice will not be as effective. It all goes back to your intention. If you are sincere in your supplications, they will surely be answered.

The type of personal advice that is contained in the wise sayings of the Prophet (ﷺ) is different from the commands of God, which are to be implemented as soon as one enters the fold of Islam. New believers are expected to immediately begin following God's commands, regardless of their level of faith. They should not put this off, because they need to realise that they will be judged from then onwards. The believer has become one of those 'who know,' as previously mentioned in the Qur'an. Such people must abide by the laws — laws similar to those of the Jews and Christians. The new believers must worship God and God alone. They must not lie, steal, cheat, kill, oppress others or themselves, drink alcohol, take drugs, seek intimacy with anyone other than a lawful spouse... and the list goes on to include all the things that are considered immoral, evil or wrong.

There are several famous sayings from the Prophet (ﷺ) about dealing with a grey area, where we are not sure if something is permissible or not. We should stay away from the grey areas because it is safer in the end. One such saying tells us to ‘ask our heart’ before taking a particular action.

«Wâbisa ibn Ma’bad narrated: I came to the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ), and he asked: Have you come to ask about righteousness?

I replied: Yes.

He said: Consult your heart. Righteousness is that about which the soul feels tranquil and the heart feels tranquil; wrongdoing is that which wavers in the soul and moves to and fro in the breast, even though people have, again and again, given you their legal opinion in its favour.» (A reliable hadith recorded by Ahmad and ad-Dârimi)

This hadith is very interesting. It indicates that our hearts should act as a guide. As such, they must already contain prior knowledge of what is right and wrong, good and bad, pure and impure, before we question them. Who implanted them with this knowledge? Who gave our hearts the faculty by which they are able to distinguish between what is acceptable and what is not? Who made them feel at ease with what is pure but uneasy about what is wrong and impure?

This hadith also indicates that all human beings have a similar gauging system in place. All of us: men and women, girls and boys, black and white, rich and poor, Arab and non-Arab, have the same gauge (sometimes referred to as a conscience) by which to assess the validity or falsity of something. We just have to use it as it was meant to be used. On the Day of Judgement, people will say:

﴿... لَوْ كُنَّا شَمِعْ أَوْ نَقِيلُ مَا كَانَ فِي أَحْسَبِ الْأَسْعَدِ ﴾ (سورة الملك: ١٠)
﴿...If we had heard or had considered, in no way would we have been among the companions of the blaze.﴾ (Qur'an 67: 10)

People who deny God have probably never considered such a notion. They are, in fact, using their God-given faculties to come to

the worst conclusion ever. By misusing their own right to freedom of choice, freedom of speech and freedom of expression, they enslave themselves without realizing it. They misuse the very faculty that could extricate them from their self-delusion: the heart. They bow to the suggestions of Satan instead of to their rightful Lord. They will pay a high price for it, if they have not done so already.

SOME BASICS OF ISLAM

*T*he first divine commandment sent down to Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ), over fourteen hundred years ago, was the command to “Read!” Islam is the only religion to begin with such an order. Before obedience, before worship, before prostration, before devotion and before abstaining from sin, he was told to read. Why was he commanded to read first? Why was our uneducated, illiterate Prophet (ﷺ) given such an instruction? How odd!

(Incidentally, it is curious that an illiterate man could have authored the Qur'an, which is currently the reference book and source of knowledge concerning the grammar, punctuation, pronunciation, and semantic style of classical Arabic and modern standard Arabic, acknowledged by Arab Muslims and Christians alike to be an unmatched, timeless wonder of their language.)

We were commanded to read, first and foremost, because it is through reading that we can overcome ignorance and misinformation, the two inexcusable conditions that lead to many people's demise or downfall. Prophet Muhammad's (ﷺ) mission was, in effect, to erase the remnants of ignorance and backwardness of the pre-Islamic era, aptly called *jâhiliyah* in Arabic, or the period of ignorance. He brought the light of truth and reason, which extinguishes falsehood just as water extinguishes fire. Through reading, we can gain religious knowledge, or any useful knowledge, that can take us out of our present woes and return a sense of

normalcy to our lives. That is exactly what happened to me. Like most Americans, I hardly knew anything about Islam, then I read and I was convinced of it. Why? Because it just made sense — it had a ring of truth about it, not to mention the fact that it was so reassuring and comforting to know that there **was** in fact a God who **had** heard my prayers when I had called out to Him for guidance just weeks before.

Looking back, my sincerity won me the answer I so desperately sought. I was just an honest, determined seeker of knowledge. I didn't 'know', but I so much wanted to 'know'. I was on the floor, begging for guidance, imploring God for a way off my emotional roller coaster. I did not know where, when or even if it was going to stop. Then it did. My prayer was answered. God heard me. May God grant the gift of guidance and permanent peace of mind to all those who seek it.

Islam advises us to honour our trusts and never go back on our word. If we make a promise, we should keep it. If we accept Islam, we should enter it whole-heartedly. If we do any sort of work or project, we should do it in the best way possible. If we arrange to meet someone at a certain time, we are expected to go and not be late. We will be called to account for all our actions. We must not mislead people, even children. We are not allowed to promise them something unless we fully intend to give it to them. This kind of teasing is expressly prohibited. Islam teaches us to respect the young, to treat children on an equal basis and to respect the elderly, who have rights upon us as well.

Our parents are due the highest level of respect. Obedience to them is often mentioned in the Qur'an, right after the worship of God. The Qur'an repeatedly invokes us to revere God and the womb that bore us. If our parents reach old age, we are to take full responsibility for them. We must care and provide for them during their time of need, just as they cared and provided for us when we were young.

Muslims are supposed to be kind and dutiful; we should never raise our voices in anger or frustration at our mothers or fathers. Obviously, parents enjoy a high status because of all the sacrifices they make for us and because they are the physical reason we are here. One of the signs of the impending Day of Judgement is that children will have little or no respect for their parents. I wonder if that trend is already in progress.

Islam teaches us to control ourselves, especially our anger, and to persevere patiently throughout the trials and tribulations of life.

The Prophet (ﷺ) taught that patience is assessed from the first stroke of a calamity.⁷

We are not supposed to yell, scream or grossly overreact when a sudden calamity or misfortune occurs. We are allowed to cry and mourn and even complain to God, as long as it is not in an accusatory manner. Moreover, we must not grow impatient with the decree of God. Believing in divine preordainment is one of the major aspects of Islam. There are six cornerstones of faith.⁸ The sixth one is belief in divine will, or *qadr* in Arabic. Qadr is one of the Islamic concepts that is most widely misunderstood and debated, along with *jihad* (striving for the sake of Allah) and women's rights. Here is a brief explanation of what it entails.

⁷ Narrated Anas ibn Mâlik (رضي الله عنه), who heard the Prophet (ﷺ) say: «Patience is at the first stroke of a calamity.» (Bukhari)

⁸ The other five articles of faith are belief in: God, His angels, His divinely revealed books, the prophets and messengers sent throughout the ages, and the Day of Resurrection.

DIVINE PREORDAINMENT OR QADR IN ISLAM

Islam teaches us that the souls of all human beings who will ever be born on Earth, meaning all the descendants of Adam and Eve (may Allah's peace be upon them), were fashioned some fifty thousand years before the creation of the universe.⁹ God created a pen to record all the events that would take place during our lifetimes. We, of course, have no idea what will happen to us, but God already knows. Who would have thought someone like me, from New York, born of Russian Jewish immigrants, would grow up to cover my hair and change my religion one day?

God knew because He is omniscient and all-powerful, able to enforce His will. It says in the Qur'an:

﴿ذَلِكَ هُدَى اللَّهِ يَهْدِي بِهِ مَن يَشَاءُ مِنْ عِبَادِهِ ...﴾ (سورة الأنعام: ٨٨)
 «This is Allah's guidance, He guides thereby whom He pleases of His servants...» (Qur'an 6: 88)

This verse is often misinterpreted. To whom will God show guidance? The verse does not mean that God picks and chooses us at random to bow to Him. No, it is a privilege — the greatest privilege there is. The verse means that if you yourself show an inclination to be guided, God will facilitate your decision. When He directs you to guidance, you will be guided. In another verse we read:

⁹ On the authority of 'Abdullâh ibn 'Amr ibn al-'Âş, who reported that he heard Allah's Messenger (ﷺ) say: «Allah ordained the measure [of everything] of the creation fifty thousand years before He created the heavens and the earth, as His throne was upon water.» (Muslim)

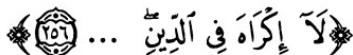
﴿ذَلِكَ يَا أَيُّهُ الَّهُ لَمْ يَكُنْ مُغَيِّرًا لِقَوْمَهَا عَلَىٰ قَوْمٍ حَتَّىٰ يُغَيِّرُوا مَا بِأَنفُسِهِمْ﴾
 (سورة الأنفال: ٥٣)



﴿That is because Allah would not change a favour that He had bestowed upon a people until they change what is within themselves...﴾ (Qur'an 8: 53)

Once we take the initiative, God will certainly respond. There is no coercion upon us. Indeed, there is a saying in Islam, from the Qur'an itself:

(سورة البقرة: ٢٥٦)



﴿There is no compulsion in religion...﴾ (Qur'an 2: 256)

Nothing is forced upon us. We are free to chart our own destiny.

However, this does not negate the fact that it has already been charted for us. The ink has already dried, but the one thing that can change our fate is steady, intense invocation to God Almighty.¹⁰ There are no intermediaries and no intercessors; we have to ask Him directly. God also blots out and erases sins for those who repent and do good deeds. He is the most Kind and Merciful and Forgiving, ready to receive anyone who sincerely submits to Him, even if that person has committed the most heinous crimes. The door of repentance is always wide open.

How does God's foreknowledge of the future interact with our freedom of choice or our free will? As an example, consider someone who is looking for a spouse. There is usually, or ideally, no pressure on anyone to choose a specific man or woman to marry. Islam, in fact, forbids marriage by compulsion; we are all free to choose who our lifelong partner will be. However, before we even set foot out the

¹⁰ «Nothing can change destiny except [sincere] supplication.» (a reliable hadith recorded by Ahmad and at-Tirmidhi)

door, God already knows who we are going to choose. He knows how many children we are going to have, if any. He knows what their names will be. He knows everything about them and about us, and about all the children of Adam (ﷺ), until the end of time.

The details as to how qadr plays out in our daily lives have been the subject of much debate from time immemorial up until the present. Every generation wants to know: "How is it fair that I will be judged for something over which I have no control?" or: "What is the point of going through life if the outcome has already been determined?" People have put forth arguments that tend to lead them into philosophical labyrinths full of misunderstanding and misconceptions. We are cautioned against engaging in this type of uninformed, rhetorical guesswork. Islam encourages critical thinking and an inquiring mind, but when it comes to the issue of fate, the Prophet (ﷺ) has advised us to desist. These questions contain faulty logic, the kind Satan loves to manipulate. Only God truly knows the answers. Does our scepticism, the aimless musings of mere human beings, change the ultimate reality? We were born pure and sinless. We are here on earth to do good. We will be held responsible for our actions. No one is forced to do evil. Beyond that, we are not equipped with enough information to make any grand or sweeping statements at all. It is only after we have studied the matter thoroughly that we have any right to discuss it. The Qur'an tells us not to become too deeply concerned with such matters. Previous peoples fell into such arguments, and on that account, they lost faith and deviated from the path. They had been warned, but the devil has a way with human beings. That is why we have to be aware of his sly whisperings. They will always lead us astray, no matter how alluring or plausible or benign they may seem.

Islam is a practical religion, which addresses and caters to all the needs of human beings, even our natural curiosity and quest for knowledge. It is a praiseworthy trait that human beings love learning and want to be well-informed. We discover new things by this drive

to press forward and overcome our ignorance. It is how we expand our horizons. It is how we may eventually adopt Islam as our way of life.

Children, who epitomise human nature in its most pristine form, are naturally curious about their surroundings. They are always asking questions, poised to absorb as much information about the world around them as they can. However, we are warned in the Qur'an about being overly quarrelsome. Our tendency, as we grow older, to dispute, make excuses for ourselves and present flimsy arguments is not considered a commendable quality. We read:

(سورة الكهف : ٥٤)

﴿... وَكَانَ الْإِنْسَنُ أَكْثَرَ شَقِّيًّا جَدَلًا ﴾

﴿...But man is more than anything contentious.﴾ (*Qur'an 18: 54*)

By nature, we are inquisitive and eager to learn, but we are not to carry it to the extreme by being overly confident, obstinate, incredulous or close-minded.

Qadr is a fact. In Islam, we are expected to acknowledge and accept both the good and bad of it. Of course, our vision is severely restricted and often distorted. Believers know that all good comes from God and all evil emanates from our own souls and the promptings of Satan. However, not all seemingly negative occurrences are, in actuality, bad. Likewise, not all that glitters is necessarily gold. The truth is that we cannot fully ascertain what is ultimately good or bad for us. God has laid down the guidelines. We are simply supposed to follow them. Then, we are promised to be eased into a good life,¹¹ no matter how many adverse experiences we encounter along the way.

¹¹ ﴿So he who gives in charity and fears Allah, and testifies to the best, We will indeed make smooth for him the path to bliss.﴾ (*Qur'an 92: 5-7*)

MODERATION IN ISLAM

*W*hat basic advice does Islam offer us, to keep us on an even keel? Firstly, the nation of believers in Islam, the *Ummah*, is described as a ‘community of moderation,’ contrary to how it is portrayed in the media. Muslims are expected to maintain a delicate balance between any two extremes: the worldly and the spiritual, work and relaxation, pride¹² and humility, extravagance and miserliness, even hunger and satiety. The religion strikes a beautiful balance for us in all areas of life. Islam commands us to fulfil certain duties and obligations, but there are always exceptions for those who are unable to do so. We are prohibited from eating pork products, for example, unless it is out of dire necessity. We are ordered to participate in jihad (which will be discussed later) unless we are ill, lame or destitute; even our duty to our parents outweighs the obligation to bear arms. We are told to pray and fast; we are instructed to go for pilgrimage to Makkah only if circumstances permit. We are expected to pray standing up, unless we are too old or weak, in which case we may sit down. As a last resort, if we are totally incapacitated, we can pray by moving our eyes only. Of course, the ritual ablution is also simplified for the bedridden.

Overall, Islam accommodates the various needs and situations of all members of the society, in all places and at all times. If someone, for example, literally has no access to books or religious information but wants to be pious, God will understand the situation and recompense accordingly. God does not charge anyone with a responsibility or a burden greater than he or she can possibly bear. This is a central tenet of the religion of Islam. It is also an indication of God’s justice. God informs us that He is always just to all of His creatures: believers and disbelievers alike. He simply wants us to be

¹² This is not the kind of pride connoting haughtiness or arrogance, but the kind that denotes a sense of dignity and self-respect.

pure and appreciate His favours upon us, so that perchance we may give thanks. He has made His path easy and clear to all those endowed with an inkling of spiritual insight.

THE MUSLIM MINDSET

*M*uslims see life as a test. We are blessed to know that, in reality, our life is just a short exam. How do a few decades compare to an eternity? Our existence here on earth is actually a trial: a temporary loan of life, given to us for a fixed period of time. We are all on probation, neither fully innocent nor fully guilty. We have neither been caught nor convicted. We are being watched and followed; we are under surveillance. Our every action is being recorded, even as we speak, to be used as evidence later on. There are two angels charged with recording our deeds, one on our left shoulder and one on our right. Our good deeds are being recorded by the angel on the right. The angel on the left is entrusted with recording our bad deeds. He does not write them down right away, though; he waits and gives us a chance to repent first. If we repent, he desists. Moreover, if we stop ourselves from doing the sin, the other angel goes ahead and records it as a full good deed. Repentance and self-restraint are two main features of Islam. According to a hadith recorded by Bukhari, our Prophet (ﷺ) used to repent over seventy times a day — and who was more God-conscious than he was?

A Muslim must always keep oneself in check and never exceed the limits set by God. We are expected to follow the example of the Prophet (ﷺ), the best example there is. One wonders why he taught us that we would receive a reward for repelling an evil tendency before we act on it. It all goes back to intention. If we intend to fall into sin, but catch ourselves first, then we are eligible for a reward, not a punishment. Islam continuously trains the individual to fight the good fight: to fight against our base desires and wayward

inclinations. It is all part of our personal jihad or struggle. God has introduced many temptations in our lives. It is said that the eternal torment is surrounded by these forbidden, coveted lusts. We must always be on guard against them. Muslims are constantly exhorted to repel evil and purify ourselves, but how do we do that? Firstly, by sincerely seeking forgiveness for our faults and then by active resistance: by restraining ourselves from committing sin. This is a sign of strength, of great will power, and of an active conscience.

Of course this logic does not apply to the thief who sets his alarm clock for 7 a.m. to break into the First National Bank and is only forced to call it off because his alarm fails to go off! His crime is on hold. It will be recorded when he actually goes through with it. He is sinful unless he cancels the plan out of a realisation that it is wrong, not out of a fear of being caught, for example, or of damaging his reputation.

Islam assigns paramount importance to the intention of the individual, as the previous example illustrates. Many sayings of the Prophet (ﷺ) are related to this concept, including the following about how angels record our deeds.¹³

The most famous hadith in this respect reports: «Actions are judged by intentions, so each of you will have what you intended.»¹⁴

¹³ ‘Abdullâh ibn ‘Abbâs narrated from the Messenger (ﷺ): «Indeed, God has defined the good and the evil deeds and then explained them. Whoever thought of doing a good deed but did not do it, God writes it for him as a complete good deed; if he actually did it, God writes it for him as ten good deeds, or up to seven hundred fold, or even many times more. If he had thought of doing an evil deed but dispelled the thought and did not do it, God writes it for him as a complete good deed; if he entertained the thought and acted on it, God writes it down as a single evil deed.» (Bukhari and Muslim)

¹⁴ The rest of the hadith is: «Thus, he whose migration was for God and His Messenger, his migration was for God and His Messenger; he whose migration was to achieve some worldly benefit or to take some woman in marriage, his migration was for that which he migrated for.» (Bukhari and Muslim)

Muslims are always encouraged to purify their intentions, making them solely for the pleasure of God Almighty.

A Muslim's entire life can be seen as a relentless struggle against evil, both within oneself and within the community at large. Indeed, Muslims owe certain obligations to their fellow Muslims as well as to non-Muslims. Muslims are expected to defend themselves and others against evil and oppressive forces wherever they may crop up. They are like superheroes incognito — rooting out evil!

It is interesting to note that this seed of evil, this dark spot within the human soul that incites a person to ingratitude and disobedience and eventually leads him astray, was not found in Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ). It is said that the angel Gabriel (ﷺ) actually cleansed him of it when he was still a child, removing it from his chest completely. He knew of evil's existence and witnessed its disastrous effects, but he could not comprehend what would make someone act upon it, committing open acts of disobedience, indecency or betrayal. He instinctively realised that those who oppress actually oppress themselves worst of all. He carried no envy, pride, greed, prejudice, or ill will toward anyone. He was divinely protected from all these character flaws and deviations from the time of his youth, even before he was honoured with prophethood. God was preparing him for a great task ahead. Indeed, it would be a momentous challenge for any ordinary human being; he would need all the divine assistance he could get.

THE MISSION

*T*he Prophet's mission was a colossal undertaking. He was sent to rid the world of all traces of polytheism and disbelief. The pagan Arabs of his day were idolaters who had been worshipping idols, stones, and false gods for centuries. They thought it a wonder that someone was calling them to worship one God. They would jest:

"How did you manage to gather all our gods into one?" Many of them preferred disbelief. They were arrogant and obstinate, and they had deep tribal loyalties that outweighed all other considerations. They were reluctant to leave the ways of their ancestors:

﴿...أَوْلَئِكَ هُنَّ أَبْرَؤُمْ لَا يَعْقِلُونَ شَيْئًا وَلَا يَهْتَدُونَ﴾ (١٧٠) ﴿البقرة﴾

(سورة البقرة: ١٧٠)

﴿...even if their fathers were void of knowledge and guidance?﴾
(Qur'an 2: 170)

Many remained defiant, refusing to accept the message of Islam, preferring error and blindness to guidance, as the Qur'an explains. Indeed, blindness of the heart is the most dangerous, debilitating kind.

However, others readily acquiesced, immediately recognising the truth in it. The first of these was the Prophet's own wife, Khadeejah (رضي الله عنها). She took him to visit her aged uncle, a Christian scholar who confirmed that her husband did indeed fit the description and was destined for prophethood. The uncle, Waraqah ibn Nawfal, wished he could have witnessed the events to come, but he died soon thereafter. This eliminated the possibility that he was somehow coaching the Prophet (ﷺ) or feeding him religious ideas, as some critics have mistakenly proposed.

The Prophet (ﷺ) began to preach in local circles, gaining followers little by little. His message was clear and simple. It contained no foreign elements, nothing repulsive to human nature. In fact, it was in complete harmony with it. His call was an open invitation to anyone longing for salvation. It was a win-win proposition, and it came from the mouth of a selfless, genuine individual. What did he stand to gain if people accepted his offer or to lose if they rejected it? The only thing that motivated him was a desire to see his budding community of believers flourish and

multiply, and ultimately triumph over the dark and evil influences of disbelief and ignorance all around them.

He was not a fake, a freak, an impostor, a poet, a soothsayer, a lunatic, a skilled mathematician, or an adept writer. These are all accusations hurled against him. In reality, he was a sincere, unpretentious, humble soul who, because of his purity and goodness, was chosen to carry the last and final message sent to humanity until the Day of Judgement.

Anyone who studies Islam without bias will come to the same conclusion. Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) was a true prophet. There were no inconsistencies about him. He was the first to practice what he preached. Everyone who knew him attested to his honesty and integrity. He showed none of the makings of a prankster. He was not interested in fooling people, mesmerising them, or misleading them with ominous threats and promises. He sought no personal gain or glory in his entire life's mission. His only reward was from God Almighty.

When some people considered their embracing Islam as a favour to the Prophet personally as well as to God, he informed them they had only done themselves a favour. Of course, God was pleased with them; He accepts any and all who respond to His call. However, when we submit, we do it for ourselves. God is self-sufficient. He does not need our worship, and it will not increase His kingdom in the least. In a hadith *qudsi*, meaning a hadith communicated to the Prophet (ﷺ) directly from God, the Almighty explains this concept. He says that if all of His servants were as pious as the most pious one among them, that would not increase His kingdom at all, and if all of them were as wicked as the most wicked one among them, that would not decrease His kingdom at all.¹⁵

¹⁵ «On the authority of Abu Dharr al-Ghifârî (رضي الله عنه) from the Prophet (ﷺ), among the sayings he relates from his Lord is that He said: O my servants, I=

And from the Qur'an:

﴿... فَمَنِ اهْتَدَى فَإِنَّمَا يَهْتَدِي لِنَفْسِهِ وَمَنْ ضَلَّ فَإِنَّمَا يَضْلُلُ عَنْهَا﴾
 (سورة يونس: ١٠٨)

﴿...Whoever receives guidance, he does so for the good of his own self; and whoever goes astray, he does so to his own loss...﴾

(Qur'an 10: 108)

OUR NEED FOR GOD

*I*t is we who need God; we are dependent on Him for our every need. He provides us with the food we eat, the water we drink,

=have forbidden oppression for Myself, and I have made it forbidden amongst you, so do not oppress one another. O my servants, all of you are astray except for those I have guided, so seek guidance from Me and I shall guide you. O my servants, all of you are hungry except those I have fed, so seek food from Me and I shall feed you. O my servants, all of you are naked except for those I have clothed, so seek clothing from Me and I shall clothe you. O my servants, you sin by day and by night, and I forgive all sins, so seek forgiveness from Me and I shall forgive you. O my servants, you will not attain harming Me so as to harm Me and will not attain benefiting Me so as to benefit Me. O my servants, were the first of you and the last of you, the human of you and the jinn of you, to be as pious as the most pious heart of any one of you, that would not increase My kingdom in anything. O my servants, were the first of you and the last of you, the human of you and the jinn of you, to be as wicked as the most wicked heart of any one of you, that would not decrease My kingdom in anything. O my servants, were the first of you and the last of you, the human of you and the jinn of you to rise up in one place and make a request of Me, and I were to give everyone what he requested, that would not decrease My kingdom any more than a needle decreases the sea if it is dipped into it. O my servants, it is but your deeds that I reckon up for you and then recompense you for, so let him who finds good praise God, and let him who finds other than that blame no one but himself.» (Muslim, at-Tirmidhi and Ibn Mâjah)

the air we breathe, in short, with everything we have. He has given us eyes to see with, ears to hear with and hearts to feel with. These abilities are mentioned together, in this sequence, in the Qur'an. He has also given us an intellect whereby we can know Him or reject Him. His signs are all around us, but growing up without faith and outside the light of truth, we have grown oblivious to them. He created the sun as a lamp, giving off heat and light. He created the moon in the sky to enable us to keep track of time and to know the months, including those of fasting and pilgrimage. He created the stars as an adornment and as a means of navigation. He created everything in the universe as a testimony to His greatness and awesome power. However, God has kept His identity hidden. He offers no physical proof of His existence because it wouldn't be much of a trial then, would it? Our life is simply a test. Who will pass the test and who will fail? If we could see God, then we would all acknowledge His majesty. We would then be forced to believe, with no credit on our part. Forced belief is worthless. It does not reflect any hard work or effort or higher intellectual activity. In fact, it requires no thought at all. We are human beings, not angels or beasts. We have been blessed with a mind to think and reflect.

Will we follow the way of Satan or the way of the Prophet ﷺ? It is up to us. That is why there is no compulsion in religion. Your beliefs must be your own — not out of pressure, but out of your own personal conviction.

God created us ‘in toil’. We are told to labour hard, to struggle, to actively seek what we want and need, to search for His signs in the heavens and the earth and in our own selves and bodies. He knew we would require further proof, so He sent prophets and messengers, out of His graciousness and mercy, to reveal to us His message. God's message teaches us how to worship Him and Him alone and how to achieve success, both here and in the hereafter. Whoever follows Him, by obeying His commandments, will be rewarded. Whoever rejects them will meet with inevitable failure.

God has not made his message esoteric, filled with cryptic meanings and messages, full of obscure ideas, difficult to understand and accept; He has made it simple and straightforward. Believe in God. Do good. Be patient. Only then will a reward await you. Those who have intellects and pure souls should immediately recognise the truth of it; it is the same message sent to Moses and Jesus (may Allah's peace be upon them). They should recognise the truth of the call of the last prophet and messenger, Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ), and should readily identify themselves as Muslims even if they are hearing the word for the first time. Believe me, you have been a Muslim if you have entertained a sincere belief in God your whole life (even if people called you crazy for it), if you have been looking for but have never found the path leading to Him, or if you were never fully convinced that the Torah or the Bible was the infallible word of God.

To declare your true identity and become a Muslim by word and by deed, you make the declaration of faith, called the *shahâdah*. In English, it is rendered as: "I bear witness that there is no deity worthy of worship except God and that Muhammad is His Messenger." Taking the shahâdah is a momentous, life-changing event. It is actually a victory. It marks a new beginning. It is the calm at the end of the storm. It signifies the end of falsehood and the recognition of truth. New Muslims are instantly cleansed of all the sins they have ever committed up until that point. Not only are they completely purified and as sinless as a newborn baby, but their past sins automatically turn into good deeds. Therefore, they start their new life with some weight on their scales. They are in an enviable position. Most Muslim 'reverts', as they are called, are not fully aware of the magnitude of such an event until sometime afterwards, when their faith becomes stronger and they are better able to appreciate the greatness of the gift they have been given. Personally, I don't know what I ever did to deserve such an honour. If I were to praise God all day and prostrate to Him all night, I could never come

close to showing my gratitude to Him for answering my prayers and granting me such an unparalleled blessing!

HOW IS THE RELIGION OF ISLAM UNIQUE?

Firstly, Muslims are one hundred percent sure of the truth and eternal relevancy of their religion.¹⁶ They are rewarded with an assurance of faith from God. This is why people of various religious backgrounds flock to Islam, but Muslims rarely give up their beliefs for those of another faith. Secondly, it is the only religion that has a record of accomplishment for dealing with humanity's deepest concerns. As mentioned, its teachings serve to prevent or eliminate forces of contention before they escalate into all-out problems or unmanageable situations. This pre-emptive strategy has the potential to alleviate the suffering of humanity throughout the world. The fact that this has not been accomplished yet is hardly a reflection on the religion of Islam, which is like a sports car raring to go. It is a reflection on the short-sightedness of individuals, like the driver or the mechanic in the example of a car. These people, who are sometimes leaders, would do better not to be in positions of authority. They will be the first to be called to account by God. If they are Muslim, then they know that Islam has all the answers. They know that during the time of the Prophet ﷺ and immediately afterwards, when Islamic law was in place, society thrived. Knowledge and learning greatly expanded, economies boomed, citizens prospered, and people were content.

Of course, no society is free from the unavoidable, and early Muslims were no exception; they faced major challenges like drought and food shortages. There were dissenters who refused to

¹⁶ Followers of other religions may believe themselves to be correct, but when presented with irrefutable evidence, they are inclined towards Islam.

pay taxes, and enemies of Islam who tortured the Muslims. Nevertheless, their faith provided them with a powerful indifference to the pressures of life all around them. They stood firm with stoic resistance. Their level of faith was such that they would offer their last morsel of bread to a needy person, resting assured that God would soon replace it for them. No community, either before or after, reached such heights of virtue and genuine brotherhood, emanating from a common spirit of selflessness and sacrifice. The key to their success was not necessarily in avoiding conflict but in dealing with it in the best way possible.

If you want to experience heaven on earth, or the closest thing to it, then implement Islamic law. If your government is hesitant, then you can implement it in your own home. It is an individual choice and an individual responsibility. It will rid you of any and all problems you may be facing today. Even if you are reluctant to change religions, you would do better to implement Islamic law from purely a social standpoint. It can change lives. It can win hearts. It can bring peace. It can save families. It can save nations. It can take us out of the depths of darkness. It is the least we can do for ourselves, for our families, and for the coming generations. We are (or were) astray, misguided and far off the path; we are paying a heavy price for it.

Let us spare our children the agony of going through life as we did: unaware, groping through the darkness of our mundane existence, trying to find a reason, a purpose behind it all. Wondering what in the world we are here for, if anything. Wondering what to do with all those pent-up emotions and frustrations that keep on eating us, gnawing at us, reminding us that there is something terribly awry; looking for answers in philosophy, sciences, history, religion, psychology, but to no avail; seeking comfort in things that can never comfort the impoverished soul. Souls need food. There is only one way out, only one cure, only one answer, only one truth. I attest that there is only One God, and I attest that Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) was His final Prophet and Messenger.

JIHAD

*T*he word jihad, sometimes mistranslated as a ‘holy war’, means struggle or striving in the way of God. The root word of jihad, *juhd*, means effort. Muslims are called upon to exert effort in the way of their religion. What does that entail? There are two kinds of jihad: the jihad of the individual soul, and collective jihad in the path of God. The first type, the inner jihad, is incumbent upon all Muslims. All Muslims who strive to be better individuals; control their evil tendencies; enjoin what is good and forbid what is evil; advise their friends and families; instil values in children; overcome ignorance, pride, greed and all the destructive human qualities; learn and teach their religion; or dress in an appropriate way are actually performing jihad, perhaps without knowing it.

As mentioned, jihad is an ongoing struggle against evil. If all Muslims practiced jihad correctly, specifically the inner jihad of purifying the soul and the intentions, which leads to correct action, then Islam would have caught on long ago. The problem is with the Muslims, not with Islam. The Muslims are weak and ineffectual. They are sitting atop a huge treasure chest, but they seem to have lost the key. They have yet to open it and extract the jewels and gems of their beautiful way of life. They have so much wealth and potential, and they are well aware of it, but they have yet to tap into it. This is not just my own opinion; it is the opinion of nearly all Muslims, even those most guilty of not upholding Islamic values in practice.

I have had the benefit of living in both worlds. I have lived among the believers — those who ‘know’, as well as the non-believers — those who ‘know not’; I have come to my own personal conclusions. Muslims raised in Islam have been blessed with great spiritual wealth that they are largely unable to appreciate. Similarly, non-Muslims have been blessed with great worldly treasures that they, too, are unable to appreciate. No one seems to know how good

he or she has it. What if we could each appreciate our own unique gifts and share them with each other? Worldly wealth and spiritual wealth: what great blessings they are!

Many Americans enjoy a relatively high standard of living: a comfortable lifestyle, extensive opportunities, good income, advanced technology and all the amenities of life. It seems they've got it made. However, these things have only left them starving for more — dissatisfied, jaded, spiritually dry and empty. Americans are longing for real, true satisfaction: the satisfaction of the soul, which money can't buy. They are unable to appreciate the blessings they have been given because they have grown mentally unresponsive to the truth. They have been fed lies and deceit all their lives. They can no longer tell truth from falsehood or reality from fantasy; hence all their psychoses.

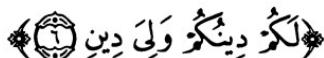
In order to appreciate a gift, you must first recognise it as such. Americans enjoy countless blessings and bounties, but they do not know whom to thank. They generally do not recognise who the provider of sustenance is; thus, they relegate those qualities to themselves. They may call themselves 'breadwinners' or 'main providers' for example, thinking that by their own hard work, they actually provide for their families, whereas it is God who provides for all. If Americans could overcome this one deep-rooted illusion, they would be free to enjoy the best of both worlds. Imagine submitting to God, committing yourself to serving Him, bowing down to the One who created you, acknowledging His sole right to be worshipped, discovering your true purpose and attaining your freedom all at once!

Muslims are ineffectual because they do not practice their religion; non-Muslims are ineffectual for the same reason. Jihad is the solution to all of society's problems. It is putting Islam's strategy for success into practice. Jihad has nothing to do with terrorism, oppression or harming others. In fact, it is the surest way to combat all of these.

The second type of jihad, struggling in the path of God, is actual fighting or bearing arms against enemy forces. If attacked, Muslims must defend themselves, although they are never allowed to instigate the fighting. In addition, they are never allowed to fight against fellow Muslims, unless their fellow Muslims are the instigators. Fighting in the way of God is essentially an ideological struggle. How can two Muslim armies face each other, let alone fight each other, when they share the same ideology? Enjoin what is good. Forbid what is evil — both inside and out. That is what Muslims are commanded to do. What excuse would they have to shed one another's blood? They are allies, not enemies. It would be wanton murder and betrayal. Muslims are not allowed to kill anyone without justification; nor are they allowed to betray. They must keep their covenant with God above all.

Jihad on the battlefield continues only until enemy forces are subdued. When the opposition stops the aggression, the Muslims stop. It is only fair. Why continue to go after your enemy once they agree to leave you alone? We are simply supposed to say to them:

(سورة الكافرون : ٦)



﴿To you is your religion, and to me is my religion.﴾

(Qur'an 109: 6)

Additionally, Muslims are instructed to treat prisoners of war with utmost respect and decency, with the hope that they may eventually submit to the truth.

WOMEN IN ISLAM

Another grave misconception about Islam is that it oppresses women, relegating them to an inferior position as second-class citizens. Whoever propagated such a notion? Western women actually suffer such abuse. Western society is far more oppressive,

and not just to women. It is oppressive to women, men, children, the elderly, blacks, whites, foreigners, natives, Muslims, non-Muslims, the world and nature itself. Western ideology represents the antithesis of *fıṭrah* (the God-given natural human inclinations). This ideology is foreign to our being. It is oppressive, repulsive and offensive to people.

Those who claim that Islam oppresses women should consider this: it is actually the other way around. Any way of life other than following the directives of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) and the religion of Islam is oppressive to women.

Islam was ordained by the Creator of men and the Creator of women for the benefit of all humanity. It came, moreover, to release women from the bondage they were (and still are) in.

It is important to first define what is meant by the term oppression. Oppression occurs when someone or something is deprived of its natural right or is forced into an unnatural, undesirable condition. People who are oppressed feel cheated, stripped of their rights and resentful toward their oppressors. They wish to escape from their plight and get back what was taken from them, whether it is their freedom, their dignity, their property or anything else. Oppression lasts as long as the abuse or deprivation continues. When rights have been restored to the individual, oppression ceases. In this context, Islam can be seen as the antithesis of oppression. It came and restored to women all of their usurped rights. It came to save them from unbearable torture, both here and in the hereafter.

While there are many Muslim women who are abused, neglected, and deprived of their rights (mostly by fellow Muslims), no one should blame their condition on the fact that they are Muslims. If any woman is being wrongfully discriminated against based on her religion, or because she is married to a Muslim, or because she thinks that her religion condones mistreatment, this is a different matter. In fact, Islam makes it clear: oppression is a sin.

Forcing someone into an unnatural, unpleasant situation is a sin. Mistreating people is a sin. Men are not allowed to oppress women, and women are not allowed to oppress men. Even animals are protected from abuse and neglect in Islam.

In the pre-Islamic period of ignorance, women were treated inhumanely. They had no rights. They commanded no respect. They were considered chattel: the property of their husbands. People would actually inherit a dead man's widow along with his other 'goods'. They had no choice as to who would take possession of them. A man could 'own' any number of wives; there was no restriction, and he could dispose of them whenever he saw fit. Women were expendable and cheap; they were bought and sold. No one took permanent responsibility for them.

Female children were buried alive because daughters were considered a disgrace; this was also done out of fear of poverty. (This continues in present-day India.) It was an evil, abominable practice that is condemned in the Qur'an in scathing terms. These innocent girls will be asked on the Day of Resurrection about what 'crime' they had committed.

Islam arrived on the scene just in time. It came to give these women their due respect. It came to release them from the bindings of captivity and servitude. It came to reinstate the female as a viable, conscious, worthy, respectable and dignified human being. Oppression was over. Women were given the rights they deserved and more. Killing them or abusing them became a crime.

Women are on par with men in all matters of religion and worship. They are to be treated with dignity and respect. One of the most beautiful hadiths states that a good, pious woman is the best part of creation.¹⁷ Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) exhorted men to take good

¹⁷ 'Abdullâh ibn 'Amr ibn al-'Âs (رضي الله عنه) reported that the Prophet (ﷺ) said: «The world is but a quick passing enjoyment, and the best enjoyment of the world is a pious and virtuous woman.» (Muslim)

care of women. He explained that men are their ‘protectors and maintainers’.

He said to the men: «The best of you are those who are best to their wives, and I am the best to my wives.»¹⁸

The Prophet (ﷺ) expressly warned his nation of the great evil of mistreating women. His exhortation was included in the address he gave during his last pilgrimage, which is known as the farewell sermon. It is almost as if he had a premonition of what was to come. Is it any wonder that three-quarters of new Muslim revert, those who have consciously chosen to return to their original natures, are women?

ISLAM AND ORDER

*I*slam came and brought order to an otherwise chaotic way of life. It came and restored the values and customs that had been lost. It came and revived the traditions of the prophets of old including Abraham, Noah, Moses, and Jesus (peace be upon them). Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) was the last in the line of prophets. He was sent as a mercy to all of humanity, with the message of truth. He was sent with the light that was to extinguish darkness forever.

Before Islam, all of Arabia, indeed all of the inhabited world, was in utter darkness. People were uncivilised and unrefined. They were steeped in ignorance, backwardness and superstition. In pre-Islamic Arabia, people used to circumambulate the *Kaaba*¹⁹ in the nude. They bowed to false idols. They dealt in usury, fraud and all

¹⁸ Abu Hurayrah (رض) reported that the Messenger of God (ﷺ) said: «The believers who show the most perfect faith are those who have the best behaviour and the best of you are those who are best to their wives.» (A sound hadith recorded by at-Tirmidhi)

¹⁹ The House of Allah in Makkah, originally built by Prophets Abraham and Ishmael (peace be upon them), which Muslims face wherever they pray.

sorts of indecent practices. They had uncouth manners, an unrealistic outlook, and little tolerance for other ways of life. They thought that nothing would destroy them but time. They resisted the onslaught of Islam with a mighty, concerted resistance, repeatedly accosting the Prophet (ﷺ) and his small following. They hurled terrible accusations against them and pelted them with stones. Early Muslims suffered greatly at the hands of these backward, pagan Arabs.

One of them, named ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (رضي الله عنه), was among the greatest enemies of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) and his new ideology. He was said to have been a well-built, imposing figure.

The Prophet (ﷺ) said that: «...the devil himself would take another path when he saw ‘Umar coming.» (Bukhari)

One day, fed up with the Prophet’s teaching, ‘Umar (رضي الله عنه) decided to put an end to this message of the oneness of God (pure monotheism) that was sweeping the land. He set out, sword in hand, vowing to kill him. On the way, someone informed him that his own sister Fāṭimah and her husband had embraced Islam. He went storming into his sister’s house and found it was true. They were reciting from the pages of the Qur’ān! He started to beat up her husband; Fāṭimah rose to defend her spouse, saying in effect: “You can do as you like, ‘Umar, but you can never turn our hearts away from Islam.” ‘Umar (رضي الله عنه) struck her on the face, but then immediately repented. He apologised to the pair and asked them respectfully to show him the scriptures they had been studying. After he read the sacred verses, he decided to go to the Prophet (ﷺ) himself and declare his acceptance of Islam there and then.²⁰

‘Umar (رضي الله عنه) soon became one of the most outspoken and strictly adherent Muslims of his time. He used to roam the streets of Madinah at night, just to make sure no one was in need of his help. What a

²⁰ Muhammad Ali Qutb, *Women around the Messenger*, 2nd ed. (Riyadh: International Islamic Publishing House, 2008), 243-246.

change of heart! He rose to greatness, becoming the second Caliph of the newly established Muslim nation. Today he is still revered as Caliph and as the second closest Companion of the Prophet (ﷺ) after Abu Bakr as-Şiddeeq (رضي الله عنه).

Islam was never spread by the sword, as some critics have claimed. Forced faith would have done its adherents no good, not to mention its perpetrators. Islam is a religion of clarity and correct vision, hence its wide appeal. It spreads by attracting hearts and minds, not by force. It causes otherwise hostile men to lay down their swords in favour of its peaceful teachings of love, tolerance and mutual respect. It has the power to move mountains, to shake the very soul of humanity, of even the most obstinate, rebellious sinner.

MY FAVOURITES

One of my favourite sayings of the Prophet (ﷺ) is: «Be mindful of God in prosperity, and He will remember you in adversity.» (A sound hadith recorded by at-Tirmidhi)

In Islam, we have to pay our dues first. We have to show our devotion before we can expect any sort of reward or payback. Moreover, the truest test of sincerity is to recognise someone or something not out of need or want, but out of a genuine sense of duty or obligation.

A famous talk show host once told of a myriad of long lost relatives of hers who showed up, claiming they had known her for years. She couldn't remember even one of them. They wanted a piece of the pie after it was already baked and ready to eat. Where had they been before, when it was still in the oven, or when the apples were being sliced?

Why should God, and to Him belongs the highest, most revered example, listen to or respond to those who call upon Him only during times of need, especially if they had been unmindful of Him before?

That is what the Pharaoh tried to do when his fate was sealed and he was drowning in the Red Sea; only moments before, he himself had claimed to be God Almighty.

Another favourite saying is the following hadith: The Prophet ﷺ said: «If God intends good for someone, He gives him or her the right understanding of His religion.» (Bukhari)

God doesn't give the person a new set of wheels. He does not bestow wealth, power, or status upon him or her. He doesn't even necessarily give good health! Spiritual knowledge is real power. It is coming to terms with reality. It is not being fooled by the falsehood and glitter of base materialism. It is an understanding that there is another reality. God, who created us, also created the religion He wants us to follow. Isn't He the best then to dictate what is right and what is wrong? He included everything in His holy book, the final revelation sent to humanity, which is as applicable today as it was fourteen hundred years ago. God is not a tyrant. He intends no injustice to anyone. On the contrary, He provides untiringly for all our needs, both material and spiritual, from the time we are born until the day we die, and beyond. He has not left anyone to have to grope in darkness or to wander about aimlessly without hope or purpose. That would not be fair. He has given us the ways and means of reaching Him, of knowing him, and of appreciating His favours. The believers exclaim, as the Qur'an says:

﴿...رَبَّنَا مَا خَلَقْتَ هَذَا بَطَلًا سُبْحَنَكَ ...﴾ (سورة آل عمران: ١٩١) (Qur'an 3: 191)

«...Our Lord! You have not created all this without purpose, glory to You...» (Qur'an 3: 191)

They recognise it as they recognise their own sons. Indeed, He created the heavens and the earth in truth, with a purpose. However, humans will not be satisfied until they discover what that purpose is, and it becomes a part of who they are and what they stand for. Hence the widespread feelings of helplessness, uncertainty and worry that

plague the West constitute the same force that plagues and tortures those who 'know not'.

How do we come to know what our purpose is? We can do so by going back to the source: by studying the religion of our earliest ancestors, the religion of truth, and by gaining an understanding of the teachings of the Qur'an and the Sunnah. We need to internalise their commands and act upon them.

The Qur'an is like a manual, the instruction book for our survival, success and wellbeing. God, Who created the heavens and the earth and all that is between, Who constructed the magnificent universe and all we see around us, Who set the whole system into motion, included everything we need to know in His holy book, to guide us through an otherwise dreary, lonely, unfulfilling existence. Who are the most fortunate people among us? They are those who have been given a correct understanding of their religion. May we all be amongst them!

THE RELIGION OF FITRAH

*I*slam is the religion of instinct: of pure, unspoiled nature.

An authentic hadith says: «All human beings are born Muslims, but their parents make them into Christians or Jews or fire-worshippers.» (Bukhari and Muslim)

Since Islam is the religion of nature, we would expect many aspects of it to match our preconceived notions and ideas. This would only make sense. And this is exactly what we find to be true. For every wise proverb or saying in English, we find its equivalent in Islam, in the Qur'an or the Sunnah. It may be found in a verse or hadith, or perhaps in an instruction or a wise comment of the Prophet (ﷺ).

For example, “Haste makes waste” has its equivalent as: “Haste is from the devil.” Muslims are warned not to be hasty, not to rush into things or to cut corners. They are commanded to be calm and patient, because “Patience is a virtue.” They should be steadfast, especially in times of hardship, as in: “Slow and steady wins the race.” Moreover, when they do anything, they do it to the best of their ability. Muslims are also exhorted to patiently persevere and to never give up, as suggested by the phrase: “If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again.” Finally, after all their hard work, they are told to leave the result up to God. Perhaps there is something in the Bible to that effect. Muslims believe in the divine Gospel — the revelation sent to Jesus Christ — but they believe it has since been changed and tampered with and is no longer in its original form.

“Idleness is the devil’s workshop,” is another saying with a corresponding injunction in Islam. Islam exhorts people to work and keep busy. In many places in the Qur'an, we are told to:

(سورة التوبة : ١٠٥)



﴿... أَعْمَلُوا فَسِيرَى اللَّهُ عَمَلَكُمْ ...﴾

﴿...Work, so God will see your work...﴾

(*Qur'an 9: 105*)

This means He, the Exalted, the Almighty, will appreciate our efforts and compensate us. Muslims are warned against being lazy and idle.

A famous saying of the Prophet ﷺ is that: «There are two blessings that many people lose. They are health and free time.» (*Bukhari*)

The Prophet ﷺ often used to invoke God²¹ to protect him from the trials of laziness and poverty.²²

Muslims should never be bored or inactive or have nothing to do. This is not to say that they cannot relax and enjoy themselves, but

²¹ A sound hadith recorded by an-Nasâ'i

²² This means poverty which is out of one's control.

they should not waste hours in gross oversleeping or idle pursuits. Time is a valuable commodity, meaning, “Time is money,” and it should be spent wisely. Muslims must reserve a portion of their day for formal worship, at least for the five daily prayers. Any further acts of voluntary worship carry great rewards and prospects for forgiveness of sins. This is how Muslims can always occupy themselves anytime, at any place.

Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) told us to keep our: «...tongues moist with the remembrance of God». ²³

What could be easier on the soul and heavier on the scales than praising God Almighty whenever we have a free moment?

(سورة الرعد: ٢٨)

﴿... أَلَا يَذِكُّرُ اللَّهُ تَعَالَى قُلُوبُهُمْ ﴾

﴿...Verily in the remembrance of God do hearts find tranquillity.﴾

(Qur'an 13: 28)

Peace of mind is an ingredient totally missing in today's chaotic world.

“Early to bed and early to rise” is clearly advocated by Islam. The Qur'an specifically mentions the day being for livelihood and work and the night being for rest and sleep. There is a certain hormone responsible for growth and tissue repair that can only be activated when one is asleep at night. It has to do with the Circadian rhythm. If one sleeps during the day exclusively, this hormone does not function properly, if at all. Ironically, many Americans instinctively follow their natural Circadian rhythms, preferring to go to bed early, while many Muslims tend to do the opposite. This is true about a great many of our behaviours, actually. We are more ‘Muslim’ than we think. Americans have a reputation for being fair, honest and hardworking. We take good care of our health. We obey the laws of the land. We have great concern for the environment. It

²³ A sound hadith recorded by at-Tirmidhi and Ibn Mâjah.

seems to me that in general, we don't deliberately take advantage of people nearly as much as some of those who were raised as Muslims do. Muslims, who grew up with Islam being taught to them as their religion, know quite well when they are trespassing; they know they will be taken to task. In such a case, it almost seems more egregious when they flout God's commands than if they had committed the same sins out of ignorance! God knows best.

"To err is human, to forgive divine." This proverb combines two facets of Islam: God's willingness to forgive us and our willingness to forgive each other. In Islam, we recognise God as being all-Merciful, all-Forbearing, and all-Forgiving of our sins. These are three of His ninety-nine names, each name representing a divine attribute. The fact that God forgives again and again gives a message of hope to even the worst, most hardened sinners: never despair. God will assuredly forgive and absolve them of guilt altogether, even if their sins were to reach the sky. There is just one catch: they must admit their faults. They must offer sincere repentance, resolving not to repeat the offense. It is that simple. It is not done through an intermediary or by making a confession. It is a direct appeal to God, who is also the all-Hearing, all-Knowing and all-Responsive.

Just as God forgives us, we are instructed to forgive each other. We are not angels. As the proverb says, "To err is human." In Islam, the equivalent is: "Man is a wrongdoer," and the expression continues, "and the best of the wrongdoers is the one who constantly seeks God's forgiveness." God forgives repeatedly. All Muslims know that. We should try to emulate this divine attribute by being more tolerant of others' faults. That is exactly what the proverb says: it is a divine quality, much 'easier said than done'.

To 'forgive and forget' is another expression we use, and it is expected of the Muslim. There is no use pining over past iniquities or transgressions against us or picking out someone else's faults. We would do much better to fix our own. People who 'forgive and

forget' actually achieve concrete benefits. They are physically and psychologically healthier than those who hold grudges. Why would we want to hold onto all that pain and heartache anyway? Release it; let it go! Seek God's forgiveness for others and for yourself. After all, "There's no time like the present!" This is comparable to Islam's advice: "Die not except as Muslims," because we do not know when or where we will die. Muslims are always conscious of and prepared for death, our inevitable end.

"Cleanliness is next to Godliness" has its equivalent in Islam. It is said that: "Cleanliness is from faith." Muslims are always expected to be neat and clean in their appearance and in the upkeep of their homes and in the general environment. This is another area where Americans seem to outdo all others. We generally shower every day and clean up after ourselves, and we do not litter; our streets, parks, and public places are immaculate. If only we could reach that same level of purity and dedication on the inside!

Islam warns people not to 'jump to conclusions'. Muslims are not allowed to believe hearsay unless they verify it for themselves. Making an assumption, especially the wrong assumption, can lead to trouble. That is why we are cautioned against it in a very notable Qur'anic verse:

﴿يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا إِذَا جَاءَكُمْ مِّنَ الْفَلَنِ إِنَّ بَعْضَ الظَّنِّ إِثْرٌ ... ﴾

(سورة الحجرات: ١٢)

﴿O you who believe! Avoid suspicion as much as possible: for suspicion in some cases is a sin...﴾ (Qur'an 49: 12)

The verse describes some cases of suspicion as sinful. Since we do not know which of our suspicions are warranted, we are warned against them. After all, isn't that how Islam acquired a negative image in the West? People assumed the worst, based on untrue, biased reports and severe distortion of the facts.

One sign of pious people (piety being the most praiseworthy quality in Islam) is that they believe other people are genuinely good, too. They expect the best of everyone and rarely cast suspicions and doubts. The opposite is also true. This idea is the basis of the well-known phrase: “It takes one to know one.” In Arabic, they say: “Whoever has a defect thinks that everyone is like him.” Liars and thieves trust no one. It is interesting to note that on the American dollar bill, it is written: “In God we trust.” As Muslims, we are expected to have complete, absolute trust in God, no matter what happens. We are never to doubt His existence or judgement. We must never deny His mercy, His love, or any of His other attributes. He has put enough signs in His creation for those who ponder them. We are to have the best opinion of God and His readiness to answer us. But if He answers our call, are we prepared to answer His?

“Every cloud has a silver lining” is an expression of hope and optimism. It relates to the Islamic notion of always ‘looking at the bright side’. Muslims are eternally optimistic. Why shouldn’t they be? They have confidence in the ultimate reality. They see life as a challenge, but not an insurmountable one. They know that in the end, God will compensate them immeasurably. Islam and all it stands for can be interpreted as an eternal message of hope and glad tidings. Islam has confidence in us as rational beings to overcome all the odds against us. We were not left to fend for ourselves. God promises help and guidance along the way, but only for those who choose to open their hearts and minds, and patiently persevere through the inevitable challenges of life.

Muslims thank God in every possible situation and see the good therein. If they lose their eyesight, they will be even more grateful for their ability to hear, speak and move, and for the prospect of going straight to paradise as a reward. They never let the circumstances dominate or overwhelm them. While believing in qadr, they feel they are the masters of their own destiny; they are not resigned willy-nilly

to their fates. Muslims are strong of will and conviction. They know that even if all else fails, God will never forsake them.

The list could go on and on. Even Shakespeare's well-known quote, "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet", is accurate in Islam. Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) warned us of a time when people will commit certain infractions, calling them by other names. The offenders, of course, will be just as guilty. Illicit sexual relationships are sometimes passed off as 'temporary necessities' these days. Bribes are frequently called 'gifts', and taking drugs is known as 'getting high'. It is human nature to try to justify our actions, even when, deep down, we know they are wrong.

THE MEANING OF BROTHERHOOD IN ISLAM

All Muslims are brothers and sisters. In fact, all of humanity is. We all trace our lineage back to our common ancestors: Adam (ﷺ) and Eve. We are literally one big (not so happy) family. God has explained that our differences in race, colour and language are so that we may know each other and learn from each other. Muslims comprise a nation of believers called the Ummah. Members of the Ummah are commanded to enjoin what is good, forbid what is evil and follow the instructions of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) in everything he has ordered us to do or abstain from. And therein lies the secret of success. We can never go wrong or be defeated. Muslims are united by hearts and tongues. We are promised a good life here on earth and in heaven, in the presence of those who have preceded and followed us in truth and righteousness.

To cultivate a sense of unity and common identity, our Prophet (ﷺ) taught us that we have certain rights upon our brothers and sisters, as well as duties toward them. I am fulfilling one of those duties now by explaining our beliefs. It is a duty upon all mature

Muslims. If they don't find the opportunity, even with the advent of the Internet, to spread their faith, then they are at least supposed to be good, law-abiding citizens, showing Islam by deed if not by word. The fact that many Muslims have done neither is a disgrace. It is an inexcusable, shameful reality in this day and age. In my opinion, there is severe apathy and negligence on all sides. Those who have lived their entire life as Muslims know they will be called to account for it, but it doesn't seem to make a difference. It is just one of the many areas where they are remiss. Even the prospect of severe punishment and divine wrath upon them does not seem to wake them up. I believe that they are in a deep slumber, just as we are in the West; the difference is that they have absolutely no reason to be.

I think that many Muslims who have lived their entire life in Islam are extremely negligent. Additionally, they often exhibit behaviours that are worse than non-Muslims, further sullying the already negative image of Islam. Perhaps their nominal belief gives them a false sense of security. Many of them believe that because God is Oft-Forgiving, Forbearing, and Merciful, they can keep on sinning and repenting to no end, with no guilty conscience or even a sense of wrongdoing. Do these Muslims, who do not practice what Islam teaches, think they are God's 'little angels', His gift to the universe? They are in self-delusion. They are actually inspired by the devil. In the Qur'an, when God tells the devil that he has been banned from the Garden of Eden, Satan tells God:

﴿... فِيمَا أَغْوَيْتِنِي لَأَقْعُدَنَّ لَهُمْ صِرَاطَكَ الْمُسْتَقِيمَ ﴿١٦﴾ ثُمَّ لَأَتْبَيْهُم مِّنْ بَيْنِ أَيْدِيهِمْ
وَمِنْ خَلْفِهِمْ وَعَنْ أَيْمَانِهِمْ وَعَنْ شَمَائِيلِهِمْ وَلَا يَجِدُ أَكْثُرُهُمْ شَكِيرِينَ ﴿١٧﴾﴾
(سورة الأعراف : ١٦-١٧)

﴿...Then I will lie in wait for them [human beings] on Your straight path. Then I will assault them from in front of them and behind them, from their right and their left, and You will not find most of them grateful [to You, O God].﴾

(Qur'an 7: 16-17)

No, God's gift to the universe is the eternal message that certain misguided Muslims have so grossly perverted to suit their own purposes. The fact is that such nominal Muslims set a very bad example and are not the true face of Islam, yet they attract a disproportionate amount of attention.

Islam is pure and free from their insult, free of the accusations hurled against it. It is free of the claims of the uninformed and the ignorant. Islam is not to be judged by looking at its adherents, any more than a race car is to be judged because of the driver. He could be a drunkard, a maniac or the devil himself! If Islam only consisted of these people, it would certainly not be attracting followers in droves. It would not be the world's fastest growing religion today. A verse in the holy Qur'an sums it up:

﴿يُرِيدُونَ أَن يُطْفِئُوا نُورَ اللَّهِ بِأَفْوَاهِهِمْ وَيَأْبَى اللَّهُ إِلَّا أَن يُتَمَّمَ نُورُهُ وَلَنَوْ
كَرَةُ الْكُفَّارُونَ ﴾ (٣٢) سورة التوبة :

﴿They desire to put out the light of Allah with their mouths, but Allah will not allow but that His light should be perfected, although the disbelievers dislike it.﴾ (Qur'an 9: 32)

The bond of unity among the early followers of Islam was a phenomenon never equalled, either before or since. Early Muslims would freely give away their possessions, though they were more in need of them. For this and other acts of altruism, they were praised in the holy Qur'an. They embodied the true spirit of Islam and implemented the Sunnah perfectly. They fully understood and exemplified great Islamic ideals of giving sincere advice, upholding justice, helping the weak, stopping oppression, promoting peace, reminding each other of the truth and contributing to the welfare of society. The early Muslim Ummah, established during the time of the Prophet (ﷺ), has been identified as the best nation ever raised up from humankind. It is these men and women we should look to as ideal examples of what brotherhood really is.

THE INNER WORKINGS OF THE MUSLIM PSYCHE

All Muslims will tell you that without a goal, life is meaningless. Whether or not they live up to their claim is immaterial. It is a fact. We must have a goal, a direction, some sort of motivation in our lives. It is part of our *fitrah*. Every human being is born with this instinctive sense of purpose.

God created us to strive, toil and work hard — all for what? Is it all for nothing? Is that a plausible conclusion? We run around all day, we sleep all night, we wake up, we get dressed, we go out, we come back, and we start over again. We are obviously very busy, but for what reason or what end? Is making money the best motivator?

Christina Onassis, heiress to the billion-dollar fortune of Greek shipping magnate Aristotle Onassis, could probably have told us all about it. She had more money than anyone I know. Did her fortune benefit her? Did it complete her? Did it do her any good whatsoever? When asked if she was the wealthiest woman in the world, she replied: "Yes, I'm the richest woman, but I'm searching for happiness." She died young, from a heart attack believed to have been brought on by years of drug and alcohol abuse. She left behind her fortune and a three-year-old daughter to fend for herself.

Money is a fine distracter, as long as you don't go bankrupt, or another Great Depression doesn't hit, or the hospital doesn't cash in on your latest affliction: a stress-induced heart attack caused by years and years of personal neglect. Money comes and goes, like a yo-yo. It is not predictable or reliable, and it doesn't always do the trick. No matter how much you have, you always want more. It doesn't satisfy. It never fills the void. It never delivers on its claim to bring even one ounce of true joy. Even if it could do all that, it certainly doesn't accompany you to the graveyard after you die. It is only good as long as you're good, and then it deserts you like a fair-weather friend.

Actually, it wasn't the money that deceived you; it was your real nemesis: Satan, the outcast.

Satan was out to get us when we were still unshaped clay, and now he is proving good on his promise. Are we going to stand by and let him have his way with us? Or are we going to put an end to his ravaging brutality, to his blinding treachery, once and for all? "I take refuge in God from Satan the outcast" is what Muslims repeatedly say to ward him off. He promises nothing but deception, causes nothing but trouble, and tells nothing but lies.

Muslims are well aware of Satan's role, and they are well aware of their own goal. They have all the answers. That is why the rates of depression, emotional instability, phobias, insanity, suicide and the gamut of psychoses leading up to it are all quite low in Muslim communities. One might expect the opposite since Muslim societies are mostly poor, underdeveloped and still struggling. However, statistics tell another story. Remember that we are both body and soul. Muslims are remarkably stable and resilient, despite their adverse external conditions, because they are spiritually intact, rich and satiated. The Prophet (ﷺ) taught us that therein lay true wealth. True good fortune is being content with God's decree for us: 'for richer or for poorer, for better or for worse', as the saying goes.

Muslims know that there is only one truth and that the rest is falsehood. Believers have internalised this fact. They live self-assured, safe and secure, fully aware of their goal and their ultimate purpose in life. They know they must follow the straight path. It is the way of the prophets, all of them, without distinction, from Adam (ﷺ) to Moses (ﷺ) to Jesus (ﷺ) to Muhammad (ﷺ), as it has been from time immemorial up until the present. It is the only way to ensure success in life, both here and in the hereafter. It is the path of the righteous, pious people of the past and of the present. May we all be among them!

Muslims know why they were created: in order to worship God. They believe this because it is true, not because they have been brainwashed. If they succeed in the test of this life, they are promised the fulfilment of all desires in the next. This fills them with an everlasting sense of contentment and tranquillity. It is not all for nothing. We are not resigned to a life of toil and hardship and suffering forever. For most of us, things have to get bad, really bad, almost to the point of utter desperation. If they didn't, we would never go out looking for the path or the truth. This very fact is mentioned in the Qur'an, in chapter 32, verse 21, for those who wish to examine it for themselves. How could Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) have been so acquainted with the ultimate reality of things?

God promises us a return on all our hardships and difficulties. The trials of life are not just senseless suffering, to no avail, without compensation. No, there is divine wisdom and reason behind everything that happens to us. Even the prick of a thorn does not go unnoticed, unappreciated, or unrewarded by God, the All-Merciful, All-Loving and All-Responsive. It is all to our credit in the hereafter. This is what gives Muslims endless strength, resolve and inner stability. They know the promise is true, so they are inevitably patient with God's decree.

The Qur'an says to those who deny the hereafter:

﴿فَتَرَبَّصُوا إِنَّا مَعَكُمْ شَهِيدُونَ﴾ (٥٢)
 (سورة التوبة : ٥٢)

﴿...So wait; we too will wait with you.﴾ (Qur'an 9: 52)

However, Muslims have hope of God's grace, while others have squandered it. We have all heard the expression: "He who laughs last, laughs best." This, too, is confirmed by Islam. It says in the Qur'an:

﴿مَلِ جَزَاءُ الْأَحْسَنِ إِلَّا الْأَحْسَنُ﴾ (٦٠)
 (سورة الرّحمن : ٦٠)

﴿Is there any reward for good other than good?﴾ (Qur'an 55: 60)

If you do good, good will surely befall you. If you plant goodness, you will reap nothing but the same. In the end, justice will prevail.

THE AFTERLIFE

*J*t is an undeniable fact in Islam that all human beings will be resurrected; they will be brought out of their graves for a day of reckoning. The judgement day, as it is widely known in English, has many names in Arabic: the hour, the day of recompense, the last day, the day of rising up, the day of settling accounts, the day of truth, and others. It will be a terrible reality for the disbelievers, the deniers of faith, and the evildoers, not to mention the hypocrites. These ‘two-faced’ people will make up the lowest of the low. While waiting for judgement to take place, certain people will suffer various afflictions according to the specific sin they used to commit. The Prophet (ﷺ) once gave a detailed account of some of these different scenarios, so that we may beware.

There are specific punishments for the adulterer or fornicator, the dealer in usury, and the dishonest religious scholar who used to preach the truth but failed to act upon it. Severe torment also awaits the one who did not pay mandatory alms, knowing they were due. If the horrifying descriptions of hooved animals trampling over you and gorging you with their horns cannot dissuade you from being miserly, probably nothing can.

Human beings are violent in their love of wealth, as the Qur'an accurately depicts. However, once people realise that their wealth is not truly their own and is merely a loan from God, for which He asks when He orders us to pay alms, they should have no trouble complying. It is a test. The trial of money, whether abundant or scarce, is a test — as is everything else in life. Almsgiving is meant to lessen the gap, as well as the animosity, between the rich and poor. It could also help humanity overcome a passionate love of wealth. God knows best. When it comes to obligatory acts, we have to listen, obey and trust that there is divine wisdom involved.

It is said that if every Muslim paid the alms correctly, we could eliminate poverty from the face of the earth. What do we find instead? We find massive starvation, destitution, widespread famine, malnutrition and high child mortality rates. Why? This is because people have more pressing concerns, like fighting shadowy enemies in faraway lands for vague causes and illegitimate gains. People are violent in their love of wealth; that much is true. But we have also been given minds and hearts, and an ability to sympathise with our fellow human beings. We have been endowed with compassion and a sense of duty. What good is all of that if we are still in a coma, unaware of our vast potential? The Qur'an describes human beings as 'unjust' and 'ignorant',²⁴ both descriptions are accurate. We display gross ignorance and an uncanny tendency to oppress, both wittingly and inadvertently. But the Qur'an did not specify to whom we are unjust. It is my personal opinion that when we are oppressive, we oppress ourselves worst of all. Are not a guilty conscience and a wavering soul the worst forms of self-inflicted oppression?

We will have to meet God one day and present our case in front of Him. All Muslims know that. No excuses or flimsy arguments will be accepted.

The Prophet (ﷺ) taught us: «Truly in the body there is a piece of flesh which, if it is whole, all the body is sound, and which, if it is diseased, all of it is diseased. Truly it is the heart.» (Bukhari and Muslim)

The Qur'an says that on the judgement day, nothing will avail a person except a sound heart.²⁵

²⁴ ﴿Indeed, we offered the trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, and they declined to bear it and feared it; but man [undertook to] bear it. Indeed, he was unjust and ignorant.﴾ (*Qur'an* 33: 72)

²⁵ ﴿The day when neither money nor sons will profit [anyone], except for him who comes up to Allah with a sound heart.﴾ (*Qur'an* 26: 88-89)

In yet another hadith, we are told: «God does not focus on your appearances or your money; He looks to your hearts and to your actions.» (Muslim)

Obviously, the heart of an individual is the core of his or her being; it is who the person really is deep down. The heart motivates us to act as we do: obediently or otherwise. It is our guiding force, as mentioned before. And God knows exactly what is in it. Does this idea fill you with a sense of trepidation, or a sense of relief? If you are relieved, then your heart must be sound. You will be offered glad tidings in the hereafter, but only if you had been a believer before.

Muslims who can afford it are required to give a percentage of their assets to the poor each year, in order to purify their wealth, and it is the right of the poor; it is not considered a favour from those who are better off. We are also encouraged to give more than what is required. Nevertheless, some people are needy, and the Prophet (ﷺ) told us that poor people will beat the rich to paradise by a whole five hundred years.²⁶ Wow! If that doesn't give hope to the less fortunate and underprivileged among us, what will? Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) correctly predicted that the greatest trial facing his followers would be the trial of money — but if they are patient and forbearing, glad tidings to them, too.

The judgement day is the day of truth, so true values will be restored. Everything will be shown in its true light. We will have no problem distinguishing the victim from the perpetrator, as we do here. We will see the truly rich (those who are spiritually wealthy) for what they are. They will command awe and respect, while they might have been the most unpretentious souls here on earth. There will be no deception and no injustice; everyone will get what they rightly deserve.

²⁶ The Prophet (ﷺ) said: «The poor will enter paradise before the rich by half a day, and that is five hundred years.» (An authentic hadith recorded by at-Tirmidhi, Ibn Mâjah and Ahmâd)

The Prophet (ﷺ) was asked whether we would be able to catch a glimpse of the Almighty Himself. «People asked: O Messenger of God, shall we see our Lord on the Day of Resurrection? He replied: Do you have any doubt in seeing the full moon on a clear night? They replied: No, O Messenger of God. He said: Do you have any doubt in seeing the sun when there are no clouds? They replied in the negative. He said: You will see your Lord in the same way.» (Bukhari)

The prospect of actually seeing God Almighty is the ultimate, unspoken desire of every pious, dutiful Muslim.

The judgement day will also be a day of humiliation. Everyone's real intentions will become manifest. Those who cheated you, lied to you, slandered you, or otherwise shamed you will be exposed, with their true intentions visible for all to see. Accounts will be settled. Justice will be restored. No one will be wronged in the least, right down to the last atom's weight of good or evil that anyone has ever done. Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) constantly warned his followers that they should settle their differences in this life, to save them intense pain and suffering later. A famous saying of his, recorded by Bukhari, tells us to pay back whatever we have misappropriated in *dirhams* (local currency or gold coins) because currency will have no weight in the hereafter. Our dollars and cents here in life eventually desert us, but our spiritual wealth, or lack of it, stays with us. It is said that: "True wealth is wealth of the soul." This is why the Prophet (ﷺ) said that the one who is truly bankrupt is one who meets God as a believer and has fulfilled the basic tenets of Islam, but has mistreated people and transgressed against them; by the time they take all their due shares from him, he will be left with nothing for himself.²⁷

²⁷ «Narrated Abu Hurayrah (رضي الله عنه) that the Messenger of God (ﷺ) asked: Do you know who is considered bankrupt? The Companions answered: The bankrupt is the one who has no money and no possessions. He explained: Among my Ummah, the one who is bankrupt is the one who will come on=

THE RATIONAL CONCLUSION

*I*t all makes sense. Everything fits together like the pieces of a puzzle. That is the same sensation I experienced when I first accepted Islam. It just made sense. The pieces of my life had become scattered everywhere. With Islam, I was able to put them back together, one by one. If Islam is seen as the natural continuum of Judaism and Christianity, coming from the same source, the same one true God, then it should not seem foreign to us. In fact, we should feel like we are coming home. We must overcome our prejudices and misconceptions first, as I had to do, if we are truly going to appreciate the beauty of Islam.

As the religion of human nature, or *fitrah*, the teachings of Islam are already inside us. They are part of our mindset, of our psychological make-up. That is why we can immediately relate to them. They are not strange or outdated or intimidating in the least. We can comfortably accept them. All human beings have an affinity for the truth; we readily respond to it. It is part of our unspoiled nature. Conversely, we hate lies, deception, and falsehood of any kind. We naturally seek the truth and try to avoid falsehood. People who were raised outside the fold of Islam face a unique dilemma. We were born true to our natures, loving the truth, loving God and loving the world, yet we were taught a very different set of beliefs.

We were once truly happy with life and with who we were. We were naturally at peace with ourselves. Then we became conscious of the base world of materialism, of false appearances and of making a

=the Day of Resurrection with prayer and fasting and charity to his credit, but he will come having insulted this one, slandered that one, consumed the wealth of this one, and shed the blood of that one. So they will all be given some of his good deeds; if his good deeds run out before judgement is passed, some of their sins will be taken and cast onto him, and then he will be cast into the fire.» (Muslim)

profit at any expense. We liked what we saw as we were fed lie after lie to lure us in. We partook of it all, unaware of the inevitable outcome. Ultimately, we had to grow up. We met doubt and confusion along the way and began to have an inexplicable feeling that something was not quite right. However, life was still fun as long as we had plenty of ‘stuff’ to distract us.

Perhaps, after a while, we discovered the world of atheism and other false creeds, and we found them appealing. After all, we were born to worship something... but we didn't like it. We were never satisfied and never convinced. We felt strange and uncertain about it, but we dared not comment. We were actually resisting the forces of *tâghoot* (anything that is idolised or worshipped besides the one true God) without realising it.

After a while though, we acquiesced and resigned ourselves to false worship because we had no other alternative. That way was the only way we knew. We were force-fed the religion of our forefathers, even though they were devoid of guidance,²⁸ as the Qur'an correctly points out; this was referring to the pagan Arabs, but it is just as applicable to us.

Our doubts only increased as instability, irritability, anxiety, fear, and a whole host of other negative emotions set in. It was a foreign concept to us. It never sat right. Nothing sat right. Our misguidance caused us a lot of grief, pain and inner conflict. We completely lost ourselves in the false promises of *tâghoot* and materialism — in all the lies and the deception. We began to lose our very identity. We had poured all our faith, all our energy and all our resources into a system and an establishment that could give us nothing in return. We were sucked into something like a black hole.

²⁸ ﴿And when it is said to them: Come to what Allah has revealed and to the Messenger, they say: Sufficient for us is that upon which we found our fathers. Even though their fathers knew nothing, nor were they guided?﴾ (*Qur'an 5: 104*)

We were dupes, unaware of the dark satanic presence all around us. Now we want to get out. How can we get out? How can we escape the confines of such a limited existence? By recognising the fallacy of it. What makes people leave error and false ways? What made the early pagan Arabs leave their backward tribal practices? What can make us leave ours? The recognition of something better — the recognition of truth.

Truth cancels all falsehood, just as light eliminates darkness. It cannot be defeated or disproved. However, falsehood can — easily. Does money bring real happiness, or is it a myth we have been told all our lives? Are the happiest people in our lives necessarily the richest? Can money guarantee an easy ride? Is suicide confined to the poorest segments of society, or more accurately, to the most spiritually destitute?

Do you deny that you were created? Do you deny that whatever force brought you into existence the first time, that gave you eyes, ears, a heart, a brain, and an intellect, can repeat the process once again after you die? The very fact that you can deny it proves it is true. God gave you this choice. If you fail to acknowledge Him, you are only corroborating the noble Qur'an, where it is written:

(سورة الرعد: ١)

﴿... وَلَكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ النَّاسِ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ﴾

﴿...but most of the people do not believe.﴾ (Qur'an 13: 1)

Has any part of the Qur'an been proven false? This challenge is still on, fourteen hundred years later.

People often debate which came first, the chicken or the egg, as each one depends on the other. There is no chicken without an egg first, and there is no egg without a chicken first. And there is no chicken or egg without a Creator first.

The theory of chaos proves it. Can order come out of chaos? If you leave the widespread destruction after a Big Bang, for example, to its own devices, is it ever going to reorganise itself, or come

together in any semblance of order? Not until the camel passes through the eye of a needle. It's simply impossible. It will never happen. If someone invited you over for lunch and you asked who made all the luscious food, would you believe it if he or she looked at you and said: 'Nobody'? Could either of these scenarios have happened without an intermediary? There can be no lunch without someone preparing the food and no order out of a Big Bang without some sort of intelligent design, or rather, an Intelligent Designer.

This is common sense. People will regret not using their common sense, one of their lowest brain functions, when confronted with the great reality. If the unbelievers are correct in their unsubstantiated claims to the contrary, that God's justice will never come to pass, and that there is no accountability after we die, then we Muslims have nothing to lose. However, those who deny their Lord will have the prospect of facing divine wrath if their claims are unfounded.

﴿...إِنَّ الْبَاطِلَ كَانَ زَهُوقًا﴾ (٨١) (سورة الإسراء: ٨١)
﴿...surely falsehood is a vanishing [thing].﴾ (Qur'an 17: 81)

Islam, as a religion and as a complete way of life, appeals to the rational, intelligent side of a human. It takes into consideration our advanced cognitive capabilities. It has high expectations for the human race: that they can comprehend basic truths and use their power of reasoning to come to the right conclusions. The Qur'an consistently exhorts humans to consider different aspects of Creation — the alternation of night and day, the water cycle, the growth of plants, the food we eat, the amazing design of animals, and the inner workings of our own bodies! We will see signs of God's power and greatness therein. However, our hearts and minds have become dull and jaded by our mundane existence. They have become stiff and solid, rigid, and unresponsive to the truth — even as plain as it is.

The Qur'an condemns people who do not use their higher faculties, comparing them to cattle (or worse), who are interested in nothing but the food in front of them. Cattle are simply doing what is expected of them: eating, drinking, and reproducing. Human beings have a higher destiny than that.

THE CONCEPT OF LOVE

*G*od created human beings in truth and in love. We were created to love God, to love ourselves, and to love each other. Love is the one emotion that could instantly wipe away all of humankind's cares and concerns in the blink of an eye. It is what could have saved Christina Onassis from her spiritual torment and what can save us. It is the common thread that binds all human beings together, regardless of our worldly circumstances. It transcends all barriers of language, race, colour, creed, background and nationality. Love is universal; it knows no bounds and has no borders. It is our humanity, our common link. Everyone craves love — to love and to be loved. It is our prime motivator. Look around and you will discover that it is one of God's many signs for those who will take heed.

God is love. We have heard that expression before. It is so true. 'The Loving' is one of the ninety-nine names of Allah (ﷻ) or God. Love is eternal. It is the strongest bond there is, linking us to our Creator and to our fellow human beings. It must be present if we are to be at peace within ourselves.

I remember the song, "The Greatest Love of All", by Whitney Houston, which was popular in the 1980s. She sang that loving yourself is the greatest love of all. Think about that. Isn't it true that you have to love yourself first (after God of course), before you can expect anyone else to love you? And if they happen to love you, you will never believe them unless deep down, you believe in yourself. You will never believe in yourself unless you acquiesce to the truth.

God is love. God created me out of love. He breathed into me of His spirit, to love and worship Him alone without partners. If I do so, of my own free will, He will love me in return and implant love in the hearts of others towards me. This is what Islam, our beautiful religion, teaches us. This is what our hearts find comfort and solace in believing. This is what our minds can relate to and accept. It is the truth. We were born instinctively knowing and responding to the pleasure of love. That is all we knew how to do when we stepped onto the platform of life. We once loved the world and everything in it, from the depths of our young hearts. Look at children and you will see, as Whitney Houston sang, that they 'remind us how we used to be'.

We didn't know hatred or malice. We didn't know evil, animosity, greed, envy, pride, arrogance or prejudice of any kind. We were happy with who we were. These emotions are foreign to our very natures; they all came later. We were created to love, not to hate. We were created to build bridges, not to destroy them. Anything else is an innovation of Satan, the outcast, the enemy of humanity, who vowed to bring down as many of us as he could. If we really want to take on an enemy, it should be Satan and not our brothers and sisters in humanity.

ON FEEDING THE SOUL

*I*slam ensures the dignity and respect of every single individual; therefore our property, our blood and our honour are inviolable. Anyone who tries to take them away from us must face the consequences. It is said in Islam that if you kill one human being unlawfully, it is as if you have killed all humankind. Moreover, if you save the life of one soul, it is as if you have given life to all of humanity. God elevated human beings to a station above the rest of creation. We are the apex of all forms of life. He fashioned us in the

very best shape and endowed us with all our various functions and abilities — but all for what? So that perchance we might give thanks. Will we be grateful or ungrateful? It is our choice, our freedom, if you will. Whatever we choose, God will provide for us. He is our Sustainer, our Provider, the most Generous, the One best acquainted with our needs. He does not withhold His blessings from anyone. In the end, He knows we will never achieve anything of substance, anything everlasting, unless we submit to His will. The choice is all our own.

Remember: we are both body and soul. Our bodies find satisfaction in their earthly existence, extracting pleasures from the bounties of the earth. Our souls find satisfaction in their spiritual existence, extracting them from the hidden bounties of the heavens above. This is something very few people realise. Therefore, when we deny God or worship false deities besides Him, we only deny ourselves the hidden pleasures of the unseen, the best of these being the satisfaction of our Lord, most High.

In reality, it is so easy to do. The Prophet ﷺ had a gift for explaining things in simple, concise terms. He was once asked for the best piece of advice he could give, and he said it was to believe in God and live up to your claim.²⁹

That's it! That's all you have to do to be assured of good in this life and good in the next.

It is interesting to note that the word I have translated as 'live up to your claim' [*istaqâm* in Arabic] literally means to walk straight or follow the straight path. In our worldly life, it refers to the figurative *sirâṭ al-mustaqeem* (path of righteous conduct), which all Muslims are expected to follow. It entails doing good deeds with the intention

²⁹ On the authority of Sufyân ibn 'Abdullâh (رضي الله عنهما), who said: «I said: O Messenger of God, tell me something about Islam which I can ask of no one but you. He replied: Say: I believe in God, and thereafter be upright.» (Muslim)

of pleasing God and avoiding all evil — the worst kind of evil being idol worship. In the hereafter, this word *as-sirât* (the path) has another literal meaning. It is an actual bridge that crosses over hellfire, transporting the believers safely to paradise. However, it is not without its own dangers and pitfalls. This bridge is said to be thinner than a single hair and as sharp as a sword. Some people will cross it in a flash, instantaneously, at the speed of lightning. Others will pass it at the speed of a swift horse or a breeze or a man running. People will gradually get slower and slower until the last ones will practically have to drag themselves over it.

Some will not even make it to the other side. These are the people who thought they were doing good by their deeds but lived a life of deception. The Qur'an says about such evildoers:

﴿وَمِنَ النَّاسِ مَنْ يَقُولُ إِيمَانًا بِاللَّهِ وَبِالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ وَمَا هُمْ بِمُؤْمِنِينَ ٨٦﴾
 يُخَدِّغُونَ اللَّهَ وَالَّذِينَ ءامَنُوا وَمَا يُخَدِّغُونَ إِلَّا أَنفُسُهُمْ وَمَا يَشَعُرُونَ ٩٠﴾
 قُلُوبُهُمْ شَرٌّ فَزَادَهُمُ اللَّهُ مَرَضًا وَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ بِمَا كَانُوا
 يَكْذِبُونَ ١٠-٨﴾
 (Surat al-Baqara: 8-10)

﴿And there are some people who say: We believe in Allah and the last day; and they are not at all believers. They desire to deceive Allah and those who believe, and they deceive only themselves and they do not perceive. There is a disease in their hearts, so Allah added to their disease and they shall have a painful chastisement because they lied.﴾

(*Qur'an* 2: 8-10)

The worst people in the sight of God are the hypocrites or false believers, referred to above. They may meet you with one face, or one intention, but secretly harbour another. They commit a flagrant sin because they pose as friends or as sincere well-wishers, but they are actually your enemies. They stir up all kinds of trouble and then absolve themselves of any guilt, claiming to want peace. They will pay dearly for their deeds. They try to fool the believers and even try

to fool God. They pretend to believe in Him, but in reality, they do not. Moreover, they believe they can get away with it. They are worse than overt enemies, worse than Satan himself. Let us, at least, give Satan credit for declaring his evil intentions so we may be aware of them.

PUTTING IT INTO PERSPECTIVE

A common expression in Arabic said when something bad happens to someone, is: “Thank God the disaster didn’t happen to you in your religion.” The worst thing that can happen to Muslims, worse than any physical, worldly catastrophe, is when something endangers their religious commitment. Anything else is considered a minor setback in comparison. This is the mindset of those ‘who know’ mentioned earlier. They truly know how to put things into perspective.

Muslims are fully aware that life on earth is a test, a swiftly passing temporary abode; it is a layover in preparation for reaching the final destination. Our whole life is like a short siesta, a nap under the shade of a tree, as the Prophet (ﷺ) explained. Therefore, when we are struck with a mishap or disaster, we take it all in stride. First, we know it is unavoidable because everyone goes through hard times. Secondly, it is part of qadr or divine preordainment, again making it inevitable. Thirdly, we know it is from God, because “there is no might or power except from God.”³⁰ These three facts provide a Muslim with endless peace of mind, not to mention strength and the power to endure. In the end, whether we accept our plot in life or kick

³⁰ Narrated Abu Moosâ al-Ash‘ari (رضي الله عنه) that the Prophet (ﷺ) said: «O Abu Moosâ, shall I tell you a sentence from the treasure of paradise? I said: Yes. He said: There is no might or power except from God.» (A sound hadith recorded by Abu Dâwood)

and scream all the while, hardships are bound to occur; we might as well gain the reward of the patient. And patience carries great weight on the scales of justice. The sin of hypocrisy is devastating because it affects one's faith. It is the hardest kind of catastrophe to treat. People rarely seek help for the various diseases of the heart because they lie even to themselves, thinking that there is nothing wrong with them. All forms of deception will eventually be exposed. Most hypocrites, however, are usually not recognised as such until much later, if at all.

There are at least seven major sins in Islam besides the denial of God. Seven of the most serious sins, as mentioned in a hadith recorded by Bukhari and Muslim, are:

- ❖ associating partners with God Almighty
- ❖ practicing black magic
- ❖ killing a person without just cause
- ❖ dealing in usury
- ❖ consuming the wealth of an orphan
- ❖ turning back from fighting in a battle
- ❖ slandering a chaste, believing woman

There are sins of lesser severity like lying, cheating, shirking responsibility, spreading rumours, gossiping, and others. Of these lesser sins, backbiting, slandering and name-calling are particularly hateful to God. We have been given a stern warning about them in the Qur'an. Regarding backbiting (an apt term in English), God asks us:

﴿... أَيُّوب أَحَدُكُمْ أَن يَأْكُل لَحْمَ أَخِيهِ مَيْتًا فَكَرِهُتُمُوهُ ...﴾

(سورة الحجرات : ١٢)

﴿...Would one of you like to eat the flesh of your dead brother? You would hate it...﴾
(Qur'an 49: 12)

In the Qur'an, God also condemns name-calling, and He suggests that the one you abuse this way might be better than you.³¹

Islam had the answers over fourteen hundred years ago to the crises we face today. Innocent children and adolescents, victims of repeated verbal abuse, sometimes resort to suicide just to escape the torture of being called names. They are literally traumatised. They can't bear to hear another word, so they take their own lives. Imagine their desperation. Islam could have saved them. It had the solution. Who would have known? People are too busy calling Muslims terrorists and extremists to notice. Do you see why name-calling was repudiated so harshly in the noble Qur'an? Where are these children now? Dead and buried! Killed for no reason. From something as preventable as teaching children good manners! Where is our collective moral conscience? Where is our humanity? How can we teach our children to behave well when we ourselves have no clue? Is it any surprise that the Prophet (ﷺ) taught us that the best gift that parents could give to their children is good manners?

In my opinion, American society tears out the very heart and soul of the individual. It reduces him or her to nothing — to a worthless, unwanted load on society. That is how our country, our free, democratic superpower of a nation makes us feel: useless and guilt-ridden. We are only good for what we can give today, whether it is our bodies, our looks, our talents, our expertise, our labour or our other resources. Our souls are never called upon, never acknowledged. When society has had its way with us, or when our looks start to fade or our power starts to run out, we are tossed aside as if we had never existed or done any good. No wonder so many people find suicide such an attractive option. As the Qur'an

³¹ ﴿O you who have believed, let not a people ridicule [another] people; perhaps they may be better than they are; nor let women ridicule [other] women; perhaps they may be better than them. And do not insult one another and do not call each other by [offensive] nicknames.﴾ (*Qur'an* 49: 11)

informs us:

(سورة البقرة: ٢١٧)

﴿... وَالْفِتْنَةُ أَكْبَرُ مِنَ الْقَتْلِ ...﴾

﴿...oppression is worse than killing...﴾

(*Qur'an* 2: 217)

Islam places great emphasis on treating people with dignity and respect. Abuse of any kind is prohibited, even to animals or the natural world. Abusers will be punished in this life as well as in the hereafter. Moreover, abuse victims will be compensated in the hereafter for their suffering, whether it is physical, mental or both. These are among the trials of life we may have to endure. After death, God promises to remove any sense of injury we still may have and admit us to paradise, if we remain firm and patiently persevere. That is not to say we have to put up with abuse. Muslims are ordered to remove themselves from threatening, harmful situations if they are able to do so; they should not be forced to put up with any kind of abuse.

Good manners, kind treatment, decent speech, and generosity are required from every Muslim. The best example of these traits was that of the Prophet ﷺ of Islam. Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was considered a living Qur'an, a perfect model to follow.³² Not only did he practice what he preached, but he was more fervent in his worship and devotion than any of his Companions, indeed than any of his followers up until today. He was promised the highest station in paradise.

He will be the first to knock on the gates of heaven. The receiving angel will call out, asking who is there. «He will reply: I am Muhammad. The angel will open the gates, affirming his answer, saying: Yes, you are the one I have been commanded to open them for.» (*Muslim*)

³² ﴿Indeed in the Messenger of Allah you have an excellent example to follow for him who hopes in [the meeting with] Allah and the last day and remembers Allah often.﴾ (*Qur'an* 33: 21)

Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) used to worship God constantly, prostrating to Him at all hours of the day and night, especially during the last third of the night. He used to stand in prayer until his feet became swollen. He would sometimes remain prostrate in humility for hours on end, until people wondered if he had passed away. However, he was simply engaged in his lifelong passion, bowing down to his Creator.

Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) was gentle and forbearing. He was kind and compassionate, even to his enemies. When ‘Abdullah ibn Mas‘ood (رضي الله عنه) told the Prophet (ﷺ) what some people had said about him, the Prophet (ﷺ) replied: «May Allah have mercy on Moses. He was hurt with more than this, yet he remained patient.» (Bukhari and Muslim)

Do you see the fruits of good conduct? Islam is in no need of our swords, fear tactics, or baseless threats. It attracts naturally, without the least bit of coercion.

Anyone who studies the life of the Prophet of Islam (ﷺ) without bias will conclude that he was a remarkable human being and an excellent role model for humanity, whether or not the person is convinced of the validity of the Prophet’s mission. Anyone who ponders human nature and has any insight into the workings of the human mind would be hard-pressed to explain how such an unassuming, humble figure as Muhammad (ﷺ) could have accomplished all that he did. He was an uneducated, illiterate orphan from the tribe of Quraysh, yet he achieved outstanding results in so little time, with limited means and limited help.

If you deny the divine nature of his call, then by default, you have attributed to him superhuman qualities. Either way, his legitimacy is obvious. He came to warn us of a day when:

﴿... يَقْرِئُ الْكُتُبَ مِنْ أَخِيهِ ﴾٢٥﴾ وَأَمْدَهُ وَأَيْدِهِ ﴿٢٦﴾ وَصَحَّحَهُ وَبَيَّنَهُ ﴿٢٧﴾ لِكُلِّ أُمَّةٍ مُّتَّهِمٍ ﴿٢٨﴾
سورة عبس: ٣٤-٣٧

﴿...a man shall flee from his brother, and from his mother and father, and from his wife and his children. Every man that day will have enough to make him heedless of others.﴾ (Qur'an 80: 34-37)

Everyone will stand alone, the record of our deeds in hand. The sun will be right above our heads, and people will sweat profusely. There will be no shade except the shade of the All-Compassionate, All-Merciful, and All-Majestic God. Knowing this one fact, or simply having heard of the religion that Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) preached, is enough to incriminate oneself in the court of final reckoning. Even atheists must acknowledge that if his message was true and if he honestly came to warn them but they paid no heed, indeed they are guilty of a punishable crime. What will their pleas be? What will they say in their own defence? What can any of them possibly have to say for themselves when this day arrives? When Satan denies any responsibility for misleading us, and the disbelievers:

(سورة هود: ٨)

﴿... وَحَافَ بِهِمْ مَا كَانُوا بِهِ يَسْتَهِنُونَ ﴾

﴿...will be enveloped by what they used to ridicule.﴾ (Qur'an 11: 8)

Non-believers have much more at stake here. It would do them well to consider that the burden of proof is on the plaintiff, not the defendant. If you want to accuse Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) of being a madman, an imposter, an author, a womaniser, a fake, or any of the other various charges launched against him over the years, provide your proof — and make it original, because all previous attempts have failed. Include your references, so I may personally respond to each and every false, inaccurate, unfounded claim and expose the truth.

God warned us that:

﴿وُجُوهٌ يَوْمَئِذٍ مُّسْتَبْرَةٌ ۝ ۲۹ ۝ ضَاحِكَةٌ مُّشْتَبَثَةٌ ۝ ۳۰ ۝ وُجُوهٌ يَوْمَئِذٍ عَلَيْهَا غَرَةٌ ۝

(سورة عبس: ٣٨-٤٠)

﴿Some faces on that day shall be bright, laughing, joyous. And other faces that day will be dust-stained.﴾ (Qur'an 80: 38-40)

What a tremendous loss for those who were warned, but heeded not.

AFTERWORD

*I*nterestingly, what made me seriously consider the concept of religion in the first place, and the idea of searching for the truth, was when someone posed an irrefutable possibility. I was in college when a friend of mine opened up and said: “You know, if God really exists, then we’re all doomed to hell.” He was right. I surely didn’t want to wind up there, so I took his comment seriously and started looking for answers. In all honesty, I didn’t know where my search would lead me or if it would lead anywhere at all. The best advice I can give someone in similar circumstances is to: “Seek and you [too] shall find.”

This is from a sincere well-wisher of humanity, a woman who is not after fame or fortune. She just wants to put a smile on your face, give you glad tidings of hope for a better tomorrow and brighten up the world that once seemed so dark.

APPENDIX

SOME COMMONLY-ASKED QUESTIONS

Question 1: How can you believe in, and worship, something that you cannot see and have no proof of?

Point 1: This question contains faulty logic. True believers have full conviction in God, needing no physical proof.

Point 2: Only doubters need proof, and these proofs are widely disseminated throughout the universe for those who search them out and sincerely want to know.

Point 3: We know that something may exist, even though a human being has never seen it, like airplanes before they became a common sight, or celestial bodies, which are too far away to be seen. Oxygen, electricity, cellular matter, even our minds are a few other examples.

Point 4: If God wanted to make Himself visible to us, He could have done so, but he chose to remain in the realm of the unseen. This is also the realm of the angels and of spirits called jinn, who live among us without being seen by us either.

Point 5: If God had made Himself visible, belief and worship of Him would have become incumbent upon all people. God ordained life to be a test so that He may reward or punish us according to our own merits. Forced belief would show no effort on our part. God left it up to us to choose whether or not to be grateful and obedient.

Point 6: This is the most compelling argument. In the spiritual realm, physical qualities take on a different significance altogether. For example, worldly wealth differs from spiritual wealth (satisfaction with who you are and what you possess). Many people confuse the two, thinking that money and happiness are interchangeable. Alternatively, if they have gotten beyond that fallacy, they maintain there is some sort of link between them. The two, in fact, have nothing to do with each other. Common sense and everyday experience show they are completely unrelated. One is physical and tangible, while the other is not. Moreover, one can be present in abundance, while the other is completely nonexistent.

Secondly, the physical hearts that beat in our chests differ from the spiritual core of our being, although it is also known as the heart. This is a universal concept. People always speak of the heart as being the centre of emotion and feelings like love, joy, sorrow and faith.

Thirdly, our physical eyes can see physical objects, whereas our spiritual eye can see spiritual truths. Therefore, even though we can't 'see' God in a physical sense, we have been equipped with other ways of 'seeing' (or knowing) Him. The Qur'an often alludes to those who prefer blindness to guidance, referring to the people who reject the truth even though it is plain to other, spiritually viable people.

By refusing to see spiritual truths, such people actually do a terrible disservice to themselves. They render themselves blind, consciously choosing not to open their eyes. If they blindly reject the truth in this life, out of arrogance, stubbornness, close-mindedness, ignorance, or any other failure to 'see,' they will be deprived of their physical sight in the life to come. The Qur'an tells us they will be raised up

blind. When they ask God why they cannot see, He will remind them that they did not use their vision correctly when they had it.

﴿... كَذَلِكَ أَنْتَكَ مَا يَنْتَنَا فَنَسِينَاهَا وَكَذَلِكَ الْيَوْمَ نُنسَى ﴾ (سورة طه: ١٢٦) ﴿... Thus did Our signs come to you, and you forgot them; and thus will you be forgotten.﴾

(Qur'an 20: 126)

Point 7: It is perfectly legitimate to believe in something you cannot see, as long as you have other ways to detect it, as with a buried treasure or even a tumour in the body. We have tools to verify the existence of such unseen objects, so we know they are there. Similarly, God gave us hearts and minds as tools, to be able to detect His presence. Our mind's eye is much more discerning and well-tuned than our physical eyes. which is why blind people with faith are able to lead relatively normal lives. In contrast, the spiritually blind, even if they have two eyes, will have to suffer through a severely limited, debilitating existence, due to their lack of true vision.

God has put signs in the world around us and even within ourselves. He has made our hearts receptive to and comfortable with truth, goodness and piety. That is why people readily identify with the values and teachings of Islam: the religion of human nature.

Point 8: If we had not been provided with these tools — intellect, insight, the power of reasoning and logic, the ability to differentiate between right and wrong, a moral compass, gut feelings, instinct, common sense, and an inexplicable identification with what is good and pure — it would indeed have been unfair to expect us to believe in something we can neither see nor detect.

Question 2: If you say God is responsive to our needs and provides everything for us (three of his ninety-nine names being the Responsive, the Generous, and the Sustainer), why is it that He leaves so many people in need: physically, emotionally and spiritually?

This question requires a very detailed explanation.

First, God is not a tyrant and intends no harm or injustice to anyone. He created us in truth, for a purpose, to fulfil certain duties and obligations. If we fulfil this purpose, He has promised to overlook our shortcomings and reward us with the eternal abode of paradise. As our Creator, He has implanted in us certain traits, features, desires, ambitions, needs, drives and preferences. These include characteristics like curiosity and the need for attention, companionship, love and affection, sincerity, and being treated fairly, decently and equally. Some inner qualities of ours have been mentioned in the noble Qur'an, such as our weakness of flesh and love of wealth. It is written:

(سورة الفجر : ٢٠)

وَتَحْبُورُ الْمَالَ حُبًا جَمًا

﴿And you love wealth with much love.﴾ (Quran 89: 20)

Therefore, we know that this is true for all people, in all places and at all times. That is exactly what experience confirms. Isn't winning the lottery seen as the ultimate success? Likewise, being poor is seen as a curse to anyone who can't see beyond the physical realm.

What can be compared with winning the lottery on the spiritual front? It is being guided to the straight path. Ask any new Muslim (or revert, as we are called), and he or she will verify that claim. We feel that we are the most blessed people on earth. And we are! Muslims who were raised in Islam often do not see the gift of guidance that they have been given as such a big deal. That is all they have ever

known. They were born into the light, so they have nothing to contrast it with. It is as if someone has had the comfort of air-conditioning their entire life; they do not realise what a blessing it is until they feel the heat. Only when something is taken away from you, or you experience life without it, can you truly appreciate it.

God, who created us, is naturally most acquainted with our needs and desires, with our 'inner wiring', if you will. He knows us better than we know ourselves. In formulating His plan for us, and choosing Islam as our religion, He has accounted for all of those needs, both the physical and the spiritual. For every need inside us, He has prescribed the appropriate outlet or legitimate way to satisfy it.

God knows we need nutrition from the moment we are born, but what kind of nutrition? In fact, we need both types: the physical and the spiritual. Science has confirmed as much. Babies need love as well as milk if they are to thrive. Experiments have shown the great response babies show to being tenderly cared for. They gain weight faster, cry less, sleep more, and generally adapt much better than babies whose emotional needs are simply ignored. Studies have proven this. Scientists have established a definite link between emotional satisfaction, on the one hand, and ability to thrive, on the other. They still can't explain why, though. They have actually uncovered the deep physiological and psychosomatic connection between the physical side of human beings and the spiritual, emotional side.

Again, this is not to say there is a connection between, let's say, money and happiness, a physical trait and a spiritual state. It simply shows that if your emotional needs are met, your physical demands will be fewer. There is no stress, so you will be in a better position to benefit from even limited physical resources. As you grow older, if your emotional needs are consistently met, you will be better able to maintain your overall health. You will enjoy

stability, peace of mind, tranquillity, and satisfaction with your lot in life. If this is coupled with a firm belief that it is God who gave you everything you have, then you will enjoy a continuous, ongoing zest for life. This is why a true believer in God rarely suffers emotional distress or upset.

There is a statement by the Prophet ﷺ that says: «Amazing is the condition of a believer! And it is only for the believer [in God]. His outcome is always a good one; if good befalls him, he thanks God for it, and that is to his credit. If evil befalls him, he endures it patiently, and that is also to his credit.» (Muslim)

Believers have the upper hand; they are winners in any situation. True believers are so spiritually satisfied and have such a deep tranquillity in their hearts that they tend to disregard or turn a blind eye to what many people see as their main goal in life: the procurement of material wealth.

Satisfying one's physical needs is, of course, much easier than satisfying emotional needs. One is evident and all too obvious, while the other is covert and not so obvious. The so-called 'West' is adept at the former, but seems to have no idea about the latter. The One who created us knows and fully expects that when our emotional needs are not met, we will try to find a replacement. The sexual laxity of the West is just one example; perhaps we are looking for the love and attention that our parents never gave us. The fact that Islam is spreading like wildfire worldwide proves that many people are looking for real spiritual satisfaction. People find in Islam exactly what they are looking for. It's the missing link, if you will: the key to restoring that all-important emotional/spiritual/physical balance.

All young people want to feel loved; they seek to fulfil an inborn, emotional need. Their society may have failed them (as often happens in the West), implying that love can be found through promiscuity. Not only will they never find what they are looking for, but they may do irreparable damage to their psyche in the process,

filling it with foreign emotions like guilt, frustration, fear, anger, regret, rejection, and worst of all, self-hatred.

There is only one prescribed outlet for fulfilling our need for love, affection, intimacy, sexual gratification and the desire for children; that is through the marriage bond. It is the only way to preserve the dignity, respect and wellbeing of the human being. That is why God, the Omniscient, ordained it for us. After all, He is the one most acquainted with our true natures.

Sometimes God withholds something from us for a reason, despite our need for it. For example, He may not give us the means to get married, although we want to. He lets some people starve to death. There is widespread drought and famine in Africa. Some people are born blind, deaf, or otherwise disabled. God could have fixed all of these shortcomings, both the physical and the spiritual. He could have provided for everyone, but He lets them occur. He has a master plan for all of us that addresses all of our needs. We do not know His plan, and we have no right to question its validity. Although we may never know the wisdom behind God's choices, it is clear that it is better for us to do without sometimes. If all of our needs were met all the time, people would never search for the truth, would they? Just think about it — what would make us return to the path, if we all feel self-sufficient? What would make us acknowledge God, or even care who was providing all of our needs, if everything were rosy all the time? In such a case, we wouldn't even bother.

God, in His infinite wisdom, sometimes leaves us to our own devices. He has created us, so He knows that if our nature is sound, we will automatically return to Him — to the correct worship and knowledge of Him. Sometimes He pushes us to the limit, but it is always for our benefit and to our advantage in the end. He has promised that if we overcome the odds against us and align our will with His, He will forgive us and fulfil all of our desires in the life to come, though not necessarily here on the earth. There's nothing

wrong with asking! A very common invocation in Islam is: “Our Lord, grant us the good of this world and the good of the next.”

Question 3: How can Islam solve the major problems of the world?

Islam is the religion of instinct — of pure, unadulterated nature. It contains everything we need to know about how to build a strong, healthy individual and, in turn, society. The problem is that widespread ignorance and apathy exist among people today. This one problem alone accounts for over ninety-nine percent of our other problems. Human beings have slowly drifted away from their pure natures over time. They allow Satan to whisper his lies, and they start to pay him heed. Satan promises nothing but deception; unfortunately, most people do not realise this.

People have also neglected religion and neglected the primary concern of a human being: why are we here and why were we created? Any society that deviates from what is expected of it, based on the divine laws of God first laid down in the Torah, then in the Bible, and finally in the Qur'an, is bound to suffer tremendous loss. A verse from the Qur'an illustrates this fact:

﴿وَالْعَصْرِ ﴾١﴿ إِنَّ الْإِنْسَنَ لِفِي خُسْرٍ ﴾٢ ﴿ إِلَّا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ ﴾٣

(سورة العصر : ٣-١) ﴿ وَتَوَاصَوْا بِالْحَقِّ وَتَوَاصَوْا بِالْأَصْبَرِ ﴾٤

﴿I swear by the time, indeed humankind is in loss. Except those who believe and do good, and enjoin on each other truth, and enjoin on each other patience.﴾ (Qur'an 103: 1-3)

In order for a community to reach any level of success, it must know its purpose, and it must follow the rules made for it. It must submit to divine guidance. Then, and only then, will society thrive. If people faithfully followed the religion of Islam, there would be no drug or alcohol abuse or sexual deviation. Starvation and poverty would be a thing of the past.

In Islam, there is a hadith that says: «There is no true believer, except that he loves for his brother what he loves for himself.» (Bukhari and Muslim)

There would be no greed, jealousy, selfishness, animosity or hatred. There would be nothing but love and good will. We would live in a utopia. Of course, human beings are not angels. Often, they don't even know what is in their own best interests. God tells us that human beings were created 'ignorant' and 'oppressive', mostly to themselves. They tend not to listen or pay attention, nor do they always learn from their past mistakes. There is not one single problem that does not have its solution in the Qur'an or Sunnah of Islam. It is up to us, humankind, to recognise this and apply it.

Question 4: What is the reason for God's prohibition of drugs, alcohol and gambling in Islam?

God has prohibited anything and everything that may harm us. The Qur'an says that alcohol and gambling have some benefit, but that overall they do us more harm than good.³³ It does not specify what the particular harms or benefits are, but everyday experience has proven their deleterious effects. They are even called 'vices', meaning they bring destruction and danger. Islam is a wholesome religion; as such, it only condones what is pure and useful. If these intoxicants and gambling were made permissible and became widespread, as in the West, society would be in total corruption.

The permissibility of gambling, in particular, could cause financial ruin in an instant. God does not allow such irresponsible, unwise mismanagement of money to occur, so He prevents it before it happens. Gambling could also become an obsession, an insatiable addiction; this would disrupt the all-important balance Islam seeks to

³³ ﴿They ask you about intoxicants and games of chance. Say: In both of them there is a great sin and means of profit for men, and their sin is greater than their profit...﴾ (*Qur'an* 2: 219)

maintain within the individual. Prohibition of games of chance is one of those pre-emptive strategies mentioned earlier, designed to thwart a potential problem.

Our money must be earned and spent lawfully. Our income must reflect some sort of work or effort on our part, unless it comes from an endowment, a gift, a loan, or an inheritance. Games of chance involve too much guesswork and too much temptation. Someone's hard-earned income can be lost in an instant, based on the roll of the dice or the flip of a card. Islam would never allow such an undeserving, arbitrary gain or loss to take place. Even if both parties agreed, God would never condone it.

Question 5: What does Islam say about equality of the sexes?

Since time immemorial, the female has been considered the weaker sex. Indeed she is; physically, emotionally and even financially (due to the unfair distribution of wealth in societies which consider her to be inferior). In Western, so-called 'progressive' nations, there is still a gender gap when it comes to pay; according to U.S. census statistics, in 2008, women earned seventy-seven cents for every dollar that men earned. This is due to widespread discrimination and a devaluation of women and their abilities. Islam does not acknowledge such a difference; the same work should receive the same pay. In Islam, men and women are equal in the sight of God; neither deserves preferential treatment based on gender. The only distinction made among people, whether black or white, male or female, Arab or non-Arab, young or old, is based on their level of piety.

(سورة الحجّرات : ١٣)

﴿... إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَنْفَكُمْ ...﴾

﴿...Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you...﴾

(Qur'an 49: 13)

Islam asserts the equality of men and women in all spheres of life, particularly in terms of their religious duties and obligations

toward God. They will be judged, and rewarded or punished, according to similar criteria. God has given men an extra burden of protecting and providing for women. Men are financially, physically and morally responsible for their protection. As such, men will be judged because of what their wives and children do (sins of ‘commission’), or do not do (sins of ‘omission’). Thus, men will take full blame for any deviations, if it is in their direct control to either stop or prevent them. That is why raising children on a high moral standard is so important.

Children are referred to in the Qur'an as not only a great blessing but also a trial. Parents have a duty to instil proper values in them, but after a certain age, children are ultimately responsible for themselves. The parents do not remain accountable forever. A woman is not held accountable if her husband strays (unless she is directly and personally responsible), but a man is not excused if his wife and children stray. As the husband and father, he must maintain order and be able to enforce the rules, knowing he will be asked about them in front of God one day. Common sense also dictates that there should only be one leader for every household, or else chaos would prevail. Hence, the long misunderstood reason why a woman must obey her husband in Islam. It is not as a form of submission, to degrade her, or because of her inferiority. It is out of mercy towards both, taking their innate natures and innate needs into consideration. The husband is entitled and expected to know where she is at all times. Just as with his children, he will be asked about his wife's whereabouts. After all reasonable precautions have been taken, we must remember that God will never burden someone with more than he or she can reasonably bear.

Question 6: Do you have to learn Arabic in order to become a Muslim?

No. Only about eighteen percent of Muslims are Arabs. The rest are certainly encouraged to learn Arabic, if only to be able to appreciate the Qur'an in its original text. As the direct word of God,

the Qur'an is inimitable; it cannot be translated into another language without losing its unique character. Translations or renditions of the Qur'an give an approximate idea of its meaning, but they can never capture the beauty, style and richness of the Qur'an itself.

The only Arabic anyone must know when becoming a Muslim is the meaning of the shahâdah, the declaration of faith that is pronounced in order to enter the fold of Islam. The testimony of faith is: *Lâ ilâha illâ Allâh, Muhammâdun Rasool Ullâh*. (There is none worthy of worship other than Allah, and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah.)

In order to pray correctly, the new Muslim will have to learn a few phrases in Arabic. These are simple and may be read from a paper at first, until they are memorised.

Question 7: What is Islam's position regarding birth control and family planning?

It seems to be the general consensus among Muslim scholars that birth control is allowed, providing certain conditions are fulfilled. It should not be permanent, unless the woman has a pressing medical condition or otherwise valid reason not to conceive. As for the woman who has already had several children and does not feel that she can adequately care for more, some scholars say she may employ birth control indefinitely, while others say she may use it only to space her children for a reasonable length of time. After that, they say, she may rely on one of the natural methods but cannot keep using an artificial method. Muslims know, of course, that God's will is always carried out, whether or not precautions are taken. It is never acceptable to terminate a pregnancy unless the mother's life is in danger.

As for the various methods of birth control, the IUD (intrauterine device) is the most objectionable. It is not a contraceptive in the strict sense of the word. A pregnancy often begins as it normally would,

and the IUD then facilitates its expulsion, which goes against all Islamic injunctions. An experienced Muslim doctor can best advise a woman about her options.

Some couples use birth control during the first year or so of a new marriage, after which they plan to start a family. This kind of ‘family planning’ is generally discouraged and looked down upon from an Islamic perspective. Children are seen as a great blessing from God. Actively preventing their arrival for no good reason is almost like an affront or a sign of ingratitude to God Almighty. Procreation is certainly one of the goals of marriage. We are expected to have children — to raise pious, God-fearing offspring who will pray to God on our behalf. God accepts the prayers of a righteous son or daughter. In the Qur'an, children are described as one of the great ornaments of life.

Question 8: Why are Muslim men allowed to practice polygamy?

In Islam, men are the protectors and maintainers of women. They have a duty to provide for all female members of the society in which they live. This usually includes their closest female relatives. If a woman has no father, no husband, no brother, and no adult son, she has the right to assistance from the wider Muslim community. They must share in supporting her, providing for her, and protecting her from harm.

Often, the number of women in a society exceeds the number of men. This could happen after a war. In general, there are more women eligible for marriage — divorcees, widows, and those who have never married — than their male counterparts. This leaves large segments of the female population vulnerable. God, therefore, has allowed married men to marry some of these women, who might not otherwise find any means of support. A man is never forced to marry more than one woman. In fact, there are strict regulations regarding polygamy. It is a personal choice as well as a personal responsibility.

The husband should try to seek the approval or acquiescence of his present wife. However, if she does not agree, she may request a divorce. Many scholars have stated that a woman may stipulate in her marriage contract that her husband will not take another wife; if he then does so, she can have the marriage annulled.

The permissibility of polygamy is definitely in the best interests of the community at large (especially the women) when certain unforeseen circumstances arise. Since it is never forced on anyone, it cannot be considered oppressive. It is simply another way to ensure that women are provided for and taken care of, and it is hard for anyone to object to that. Simply put, if polygamy was prohibited, millions of women might suffer, but the permissibility of it has never caused anyone an ounce of undue suffering.

Question 9: How can Islam prevent and treat depression?³⁴

Islam teaches us that we were created for a purpose: to serve God.

Any society that deviates from the correct guidance, which was spelled out in divine revelations and sent to humanity throughout the ages, will undoubtedly suffer. This is nowhere more obvious than in the United States today. As religious/moral/spiritual values and God-consciousness have declined, there has been an increase in divorce, crime, substance abuse, depression, suicide and all other negative trends. This, of course, is what one would expect. The Qur'an makes a bold statement about this trend:

³⁴ Depression can take many forms and has several causes. I refer here to the type of depression that is purely circumstantial, meaning due to controllable factors in our environment. This kind of depression would not have crept into our lives had our emotional requirements been consistently met. I am not referring to any other forms of depression, which may have chemical or hormonal causes.

﴿وَلَوْ أَتَيْتَ الْحَقَّ أَهْوَاءَهُمْ لَفَسَدَتِ الْسَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ وَمَنْ فِيهِنَّ﴾ ...

(سورة المؤمنون : ٧١)



﴿But if the truth had followed their desires, the heavens and the earth and whoever is in them would have been ruined...﴾ (Qur'an 23: 71)

This is an accurate depiction of what is happening today. Everyone lives as he or she sees fit, often with no regard for others. The result is that no one is getting ahead. In fact, we are moving backwards and only torturing each other and ourselves in the process. The world is not only in stagnation (or regression), but it is actually in ruin, as stated in the Qur'an.

When someone develops a new product, or a game, for instance, instructions are included on how to use it or how to play. Everything in life can be used either correctly or incorrectly. Try using a pen upside down and you'll get the idea!

Now imagine a Scrabble board, with its pieces all spread out in front of you. You have no idea how to play this game. What if the instruction book was in Chinese? What would you do then? How would you make sense of it all? You never could, unless you made up your own rules, and even then, the game might not make sense. You would never really know how to play unless someone showed you how, would you? That was the role of all the prophets and messengers: to impart divine guidance as an instruction manual for humanity.

Human beings, the children of Adam (ﷺ), are creations of God. We were created to fulfil a certain role — to achieve a divine purpose. Our lives have great meaning and significance. We were created for a reason. Not knowing that reason obviously makes life very difficult, if not impossible, to navigate through. We notice this all around us. People are clueless. Everyone has two eyes, but they might as well be blind, as the singer Billy Joel lamented in his song

“Honesty”. The dire consequences of living a life that is not in accordance with divine law are very apparent.

The avoidable kind of depression is a direct result of either not knowing about or refusing to believe in a divine presence. It comes from living in the absence of the light of faith, truth and certainty. In order to achieve any degree of success, happiness, stability, peace of mind, contentment, tranquillity or satisfaction, one must be willing to acknowledge God as Creator. Addressing the sceptics, God asks in the Qur'an:

(سورة الطور : ٣٥)

﴿أَمْ خُلِقُوا مِنْ غَيْرِ شَيْءٍ أَمْ هُمُ الْخَالِقُونَ﴾ ﴿٣٥﴾

﴿Were they created by nothing, or were they themselves the creators?﴾ (Qur'an 52: 35)

Obviously, neither one. The choice of whether or not to believe is up to us. After acknowledging the truth of an all-powerful Lord, anyone will naturally want to know what religion and laws God wants us to follow. God's religion is Islam; no other religion is acceptable to Him. Muslims know that. They know they are on the right path and that God's promise is true. Spiritual blinders have been lifted from their eyes. They know that if they remain firm in their belief, and patiently persevere through the trials and tribulations of life, they will be rewarded and compensated most generously. This is the key to real success. This is what makes Muslims stable, optimistic, content, fearless, and ultimately victorious. What a blessing it is to be Muslim! Islam is the surest route out of depression and out of all of the other challenges that humanity faces today.

Question 10: How can Islam be considered a statement against slavery, racism, and prejudice?

Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) taught us to love all human beings. We are to love them for the sake of God, meaning without the desire for personal gain or benefit. If everyone loved in that way, there would

be no slavery, racism, or prejudice to speak of. These practices all emanate from an ill-conceived sense of superiority or entitlement over others. Islam completely condemns such bigotry.

A famous hadith in this regard is: «No one is a true believer until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself.» (Bukhari and Muslim)

A true Muslim is selfless, altruistic, accepting, forgiving, and tolerant of others. We are all children of Adam (ﷺ) — equal in the sight of God.

The Prophet (ﷺ) explained: «There is no preference of an Arab over a non-Arab, or a white person over a black person.» (A sound hadith recorded by Ahmad)

Islam came to do away with all forms of intolerance, prejudice, bigotry and discrimination based on colour, race, or creed.

One of the Prophet's Companions narrated: «At ar-Rabadha, I met Abu Dharr, who was wearing a cloak, and his slave was wearing a similar one. I asked why, and he replied: I abused a person by calling his mother bad names. The Prophet said to me: O Abu Dharr! Did you abuse him by calling his mother bad names? You still have some characteristics of ignorance. Your slaves are your brothers, and Allah has put them under your command. So whoever has a brother under his command should feed him with what he eats and dress him with what he wears. Do not ask them (slaves) to do things beyond their capacity (power), and if you do so, then help them.» (Bukhari)

In Islam, there is only one way to differentiate between people, and that is by their level of piety.

﴿... إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَقْنَطَكُمْ ...﴾ (سورة الحجّرات : ١٣)

«...Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most pious of you...» (Qur'an 49: 13)

Any other distinction among people is arbitrary, baseless, unreasonable, unfounded and untrue. Since God created all of us, only He is to say who is best. As the Qur'an says,³⁵ maybe the one you insult, abuse, or discriminate against is, in reality, better than you are!

Question 11: How do you love someone or something purely for the sake of God, as Islam recommends? Alternatively, is it possible to hate something for the sake of God?

Loving someone for the sake of God means loving them with no strings attached. It means loving them for who they are, regardless of what they can do for us. When you love someone in that selfless, altruistic way, you should tell the person. Why? Because this increases the feelings of brotherly love and mutual affinity that Muslims have for each other. Mutual love is the glue that cements the Ummah together. It is what makes a Japanese Muslim instantly connect with a Muslim from Bosnia or Brazil: their love for each other and for God as brothers and sisters in humanity. How scarce this ingredient is among humanity today!

One of the seven types of people God will protect in His shade on the Day of Judgement, when there will be no shade except His, are those who loved each other for His sake.³⁶ There is a hadith

³⁵ ﴿O you who believe! Let not a group scoff at another group, it may be that the latter are better than the former.﴾ (*Qur'an 49: 11*)

³⁶ Abu Hurayrah (رضي الله عنه) narrated that the Prophet (صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) said: «There are seven whom Allah will shade in His shade on the Day when there is no shade except His shade: a just ruler; a youth who grew up in the worship of Allah, the Mighty and Majestic; a man whose heart is attached to the mosques; two men who love each other for Allah's sake, meeting for that and parting upon that; a man who is called by a woman of beauty and position [for illegal intercourse], but he says: I fear Allah; a man who gives in charity and hides it, such that his left hand does not know what his right hand gives in charity; and a man who remembered Allah in private, and his eyes shed tears.» (*Bukhari*)

(recorded by Muslim) about a man who was travelling. An angel, disguised as a man, approached him and asked where he was going. He replied that he was going to visit someone whom he loved for the sake of God. The angel then informed him that God loved him because he loved someone for His sake. When we love for God, God will love us back. What could be more rewarding?

Cultivating this high degree of love and devotion toward God, His Messenger, and others is indeed a form of jihad, or purifying the inner soul by ridding it of base desires and attachment to material goods.

Loving God and His Messenger does not necessitate a complete denial of the world and all it contains. In fact, the world is often described in the Qur'an as an 'enjoyment'.³⁷ However, it is usually qualified by the word 'deceptive'. Material possessions are not taboo in and of themselves. They do not pose an imminent threat to the Muslim character or honour. They can be sought and enjoyed, but within bounds, with caution and wise discretion. Material goods should never supersede or come before one's duty towards God. They should not distract someone from the more important business of gaining God's pleasure. Moreover, they should be seen in their proper perspective, as mere things rather than necessities.

Many Muslims who achieve substantial material wealth are philanthropic. They voluntarily choose to give whatever extra money or goods they have to those less fortunate. When Muslims feel such a high degree of inner peace and tranquillity, stemming from their love and fear of God — in other words, when God and His Messenger mean more than worldly possessions, then they can freely part with them. These people show no dependence on their worldly, material existence. They know they could lose it all in a split second, and it

³⁷ «And what is the life of this world except the enjoyment of delusion?» (*Qur'an 3: 185*)

would make no difference to them either way. They have found true, abiding wealth — the wealth of the soul. Moreover, whatever ‘stuff’ they miss out on in this life will be more than generously replaced for them in the next. The more compassionate and loving they are towards their fellow human beings, the more compassion God will have towards them. That is their ultimate, unspoken ambition.

If it is possible to reach such a lofty degree of love based on faith, is it also possible to hate for the same reason? Muslims instinctively hate those behaviours that incur the wrath of God. They may hate the people who display them, too. However, the Prophet ﷺ cautioned us against hating individual people, because there is always hope they will change and rectify themselves. The Prophet ﷺ displayed infinite hope and optimism toward people, even his sworn enemies. He prayed that they would ultimately realise the folly of their ways and return to God for forgiveness and repentance.

Question 12: You say that we will be judged according to our intentions. Will a person be held accountable for harbouring a bad intention or bad thought even if it is not acted upon?

No. Simply thinking an evil thought or contemplating an evil action is not an offense. The real test lies in whether or not we will act upon it. We are human beings, not angels. We are bound to have impure thoughts, motives and desires. The key is how we deal with them. Islam teaches us to control our desires and to keep them in check. Are we going to let our passions, lusts, and whims take over and get the upper hand? Repelling an evil thought or longing is actually rewarded by God. Far from being a punishable offense, it is, in reality, a virtue.

Take for instance a man who used to drink alcohol or go out on dates, who quit for the sake of God, after recognising such behaviours to be prohibited in Islam. Imagine the rewards this person will reap every time he fights the urge to take another sip or another look. The ability to resist unlawful temptation is a quintessentially

commendable quality in Islam. The urge to commit sin is inside us all, but how many of us have the willpower or wherewithal to restrain ourselves after acknowledging our behaviours to be wrong?

Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) taught us that when anyone gives up a prohibited habit or action for the sake of God, He will replace it with something better. No virtuous act goes unnoticed or unappreciated by God. Isn't that an excellent incentive for all of us to purify our intentions, motives and deeds, making them solely for God Almighty?

Even the Prophet (ﷺ) himself was concerned about the judgment of God. Some biographers of the Prophet (ﷺ) have mentioned that he supplicated to Allah (ﷻ) to forgive him for feeling greater love for 'Â'ishah (رضي الله عنها) than for his other wives because he couldn't help having those feelings. He couldn't help loving 'Â'ishah (رضي الله عنها) more than the rest, but he treated his other wives with fairness and an outward display of impartiality. One of the conditions of marrying more than one wife is that they are all to be treated equally. A man is held accountable if he shows visible signs of preferring one wife over the other. This again proves that inner thoughts are not blameworthy unless they are physically acted upon.

Question 13: As long as you're a good person, you don't need religion in your life. Practicing good virtues is enough. How would a Muslim react to such a claim?

This is exactly the same argument I tacitly adhered to prior to learning about Islam. If we scrutinise it, however, we will find it to have serious flaws. First, it begs the question: enough for what? For that person's actions to be acceptable to God, to live happily, to be rewarded with paradise, to live a decent life, or what? This is most likely the argument of sceptics who doubt that their deeds have any long-term consequences. Therefore, it must be based on pride, ignorance or lack of insight. The main problem with this type of

reasoning is that we humans don't make up the rules. We haven't been given the privilege of deciding what is good and right as opposed to what is bad and wrong behaviour.

Take lying, for instance. Some people consider it a major sin under any circumstances. Others assert that it is okay to tell a little white lie now and then. So which one is it? And why would it matter, if no one takes notice anyway? What would stop people from lying even under oath, if it is to their advantage and they think they can get away with it? Nothing but our conscience stands in our way, along with our inborn sense of morality implanted in us by God Almighty, without which society would be a jungle.

This kind of argument, that 'being a good person is enough' is simply an excuse to remain heedless and consider oneself safe from his or her own misconduct. It is an attempt to justify one's unwillingness to commit to organised religion or to follow the commandments of God (first laid out in the Torah, then in the Bible, and finally in the Qur'an), which they dismiss as not binding upon them. People who think in that way consider themselves special and above such laws. It is actually the appeal of the arrogant and stubborn — and I was once foremost among them! — who think they can make up the rules themselves or that they know better.

While everyone would agree that the world would be a much better place if everyone acted morally, following the dictates of their consciences, the truth is that not everyone is going to do so without an incentive. People need a push in the right direction. But which direction? It is not enough for people to claim that because they are good, they deserve good. Neither can they argue: "If God is not pleased with me as I am, why should I bother to change?" As stated before, morality is relative. What is good by my standards might be blasphemous by yours. We can never find common ground among us all, and even if we could, we would never be able to impose our will upon one another. God can, though! This is why He sent

prophets and messengers to explain the rules. God never punishes anyone until His message has been sent and the rules have been firmly established.

People who claim that because they are innately good, nothing else is expected of them, are making a huge leap of faith. They exhibit a false sense of security. They will have a hard time proving their case on the Day of Judgement. In the Qur'an, God repeatedly mentions faith coupled with good deeds. They must go hand in hand. You cannot have one without the other. Faith would be meaningless without the accumulation of good deeds to one's credit; by the same token, good deeds alone are all but meaningless without faith. They are like particles of dust scattered everywhere; there is no sincere motivation behind them, nor any blessing or reward. Many people think they are doing good, behaving morally and receiving credit, when actually, their deeds are like a mirage — of no substance. Why is this?

First, anyone with a real inclination to do good will also be inclined to believe in God, when presented with reasonable proofs or signs. These signs are present throughout the universe, there for us to take heed of them. A sincere, pure heart would be relieved to know life has great purpose and meaning, and would not reject these signs lightly. While disbelievers in God call the faithful 'blind', it is actually they who are guilty of blindly rejecting the truth for no good reason. Ask a believer for a hundred proofs for why he or she believes, and the person can tell you. However, a rejecter of truth cannot give you a single credible reason.

The heart of a person devoid of faith is also devoid of virtue. These people are acting out of an ulterior motive, for worldly benefit — whether or not they realise it. Perhaps it is for fame, fortune, a boost in sales, or out of ostentation. Only a true believer, whose deeds are for God's sake alone, truly deserves credit for them. The work of all those who are too proud to serve God is fruitless. God does not need or

accept the service of such an ingrate. In fact, a hadith³⁸ promises paradise as the final abode for any person with even an ounce of true faith in his or her heart. However, an ounce of pride will bar a person from it forever. Why would people want to deny themselves the greatest pleasure of all: seeking the pleasure of God Almighty?

People who reject God believe that Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) somehow came up with the Qur'an and the religion of Islam. Fair enough. They are entitled to their own opinions. However, as pointed out earlier, did they do the research? If they had, they would have realised the folly of their own claim. They are ascribing to Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) an absolute impossibility — a miracle of astronomical proportions. Faith is not blind. It is based on reason, logic, and incontrovertible facts. Do the research, and you too will be convinced.

A Muslim says that faith in God is the only determining factor when considering whether or not someone's deeds are truly good and worthy of praise. Those who believe and do good have been promised the same in return, and much more. Those who blindly reject faith are being unjust and are only hurting themselves. The Prophet (ﷺ) came as a warner. He followed Noah (ﷺ), Moses (ﷺ), and Jesus (ﷺ) on the same divine mission; they were all apostles of God: preachers of the truth. They all hoped to rid the world of polytheism and disbelief. The religion of Islam is the last of the three great monotheistic creeds. It is from the same source: the one and only God worthy of our worship. Those who bow down to Him are truly guided, but those who refuse have no right to complain. They can do all the good deeds they want, but they carry no weight on their scales in the final determination. Faith and good conduct must go together.

³⁸ Narrated: 'Abdullâh ibn Mas'ood (رضي الله عنه) that the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) observed: «None shall enter the fire [of hell] who has in his heart the weight of a mustard seed of faith, and none shall enter paradise who has in his heart the weight of a mustard seed of pride.» (Muslim)

GLOSSARY OF ISLAMIC TERMS*

<i>fitrah</i>	فطرة	the natural inclination (of humans) instilled by Allah
<i>Hadith</i> (<i>hadeeth</i>)	حدث	the collected statements and actions of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) that with the Qur'an form the basis of Islamic law
<i>hadith</i> (<i>hadeeth</i>)	حدث	a statement or action of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) that was remembered and recorded by his Companions and followers
<i>hadith qudsi</i>	حديث قدسي	'sacred hadith': a hadith communicated to Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) by Allah, but that is not part of the Qur'an
<i>jâhiliyah</i>	جاهلية	<i>lit.</i> 'ignorance'; the age of spiritual darkness before Islam
<i>jihad</i> (<i>jihâd</i>)	جهاد	struggle or striving (in Allah's cause)
<i>jinn</i> (<i>plural of jinni</i>)	جن	non-human, rational beings created by Allah from fire, often referred to as 'demons' or 'devils'; They have free will like humans: some are Muslims, others disbelievers; some are obedient to Allah, others disobedient. Satan is a jinni. Some

* The Arabic words are transliterated according to the conventions of the Transliteration Chart found in this book. If a word has become part of the English language (i.e., is found in a dictionary of Standard English), that spelling is used in this book and appears first in this Glossary, with the transliterated form in brackets after it.

people try to ‘foretell’ the future by contacting a jinni. Some disobedient jinn mislead people into thinking that they can tell them what will happen in the future, near or far, or that the jinn can provide people with riches or some sort of power.

<i>Kaaba</i> (<i>Ka'bah</i>)	الكعبة	the House of Allah in Makkah, originally built by Prophets Ibrâheem and Ismâ'eel, and which Muslims face wherever they pray
<i>lâ ilâha illâ Allâh</i>	لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا الله	there is none worthy of worship other than Allah
<i>qadr</i>	القدر	divine predestination; destiny; power; exact measure
<i>Quraysh</i>	قريش	the dominant tribe in Makkah at the time of the Prophet's mission; their society was based on polytheism
<i>shahâdah</i>	الشهادة	testimony, usu. the statement <i>lâ ilâha illâ Allâh, Muhammadun rasool Ullâh</i> [There is none worthy of worship other than God (Allah); Muhammad is the Messenger of God]
<i>as-sirât</i>	الصراط	the path leading to paradise that passes over hellfire, and is found by disbelievers and sinners to be extremely sharp and narrow
<i>Sunnah</i>	سنة	the practice and collected sayings of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) that together with the Qur'an forms the basis of Islamic law

<i>tâghoot</i>	طاغوت	idols; everything evil that is worshipped
<i>Ummah</i>	عَمَّةٌ	community or nation: <i>usu.</i> used to refer to the entire global community of Muslims